THE BAG OF SAFFRON

BETTINA VON HUTTEN

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1918—

The
BAG OF SAFFRON

By BETTINA VON HUTTEN

The Bag of Saffron

Mag Pye

Bird's Fountain

Maria

Sharrow

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The
BAG OF SAFFRON

BY

BETTINA VON HUTTEN

AUTHOR OF "MAG PYE," "BIRD'S FOUNTAIN," ETC.

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PART I

CHAPTER I

THE little old house, which, although it was some six hundred feet above sea-level, yet lay in a hollow, was, seen eye to eye, just one of hundreds of old Yorkshire moorland houses.

Like them it was square-built and low; like theirs, its windows were too small to satisfy people of our day; but one has an odd feeling that to such houses people of our day matter as little as people of yesterday now lying in the churchyard.

These rough-built old dwellings have an air of staid durability, of disregarding the flight of time, which so nearly leaves them untouched in their great solidity. They are a part of the soil out of which they are dug.

Thus Roseroofs, seen from the level, was an unimposing, commonplace, old building likeable only for the sake of the wide-spread, lavish garden in which it stood; its triumph came when the observer looked down at it.

The winding road, after a long, lazy, coiling progress through the dale, was met at the third of the Warcop bridges by a tributary which, in its turn, climbed the hill towards the edge in great bold laps that passed the house. And from any point of the road above the house, the glory and beauty of the old place revealed itself,—its roofs.

Ample, generous roofs they were, the great middle one surrounded by the smaller ones of the stable and outhouses; and the deep rose-color that must have been too brilliant when they and George II were newly on their thrones, had been chastened by time into a lovely dim-

ness which was further beautified by a mosaic of lichens, mosses, and burly bunches of tough stonecrop, thus seeming to claim kinship with the neighboring moors, rather than with the uneven, cream-washed walls they topped.

Miss Flora and Miss Effie Plues were very proud of their roofs, which had been brought up by carrier from the south to embellish the dour-looking dwelling for their grandfather's bride, an Essex maid; and high up amongst the heather, close against the sky, they had had built, many years before, a stout stone bench from which their rare visitors might have a good view of the object of their innocent vain-glory. Owing to the effects of weather on its rough surface, the bench had long since been painted a vivid green and the Green Bench was known as a landmark by everybody for miles around.

The view from it was very beautiful. Two fair, flowing dales lay below and where they joined, sloping together from their secret heights in a pleasant way as of two people smiling as they meet, three old bridges spanned a rushing stream which, just below the last one, plunged noisily and foamingly over a high jut of rock and then settled for a little into an almost circular pool of vivid green, quiet water where rushes grew; and pleasant green meadows of all shapes and sizes, inexorably and inhospitably divided by high walls of heather-colored stone, stretched away up on all sides to the brown and purple moors to whose ultimate edges the sky seemed to come very near.

Westward up Wiskedale beyond the beck that met the river at High Warcop bridge, half stretched a desultory way up the slope towards the largest of the deserted lead-mines on Aycliffe Head, lay the village of Widdybank, a square church tower rising from the dark mass of the trees that grew in a double row outside the churchyard wall.

The Widdybank church tower and the bright white splash that was Thornby Lodge, halfway up Cotherside, beyond Warcop, were the two chief points of departure for the investigating eye.

"Ye see yon white house; that's Judge Capel's shooting lodge. Well, off to t' left"—or: "Halfway up Laverock, in a direct line with t' old church tower"—thus was the stranger taught the topography of the place. There were naturally other points by which one's eyes found their way; there was Aycliffe Head, a hill whose crest, made uneven on the south side by a heavy fall of rocks some time in Queen Anne's day, stood out sharply against the west in a kind of grotesque profile; there was Watlass Mill, a large, orange-colored building in Cotherdale, where the road to Middleton turned sharply to the left and was for a while lost to view; there was Widdybank Bottom, a small wood in Wiskedale on the near side of the river, just opposite the village church.

A fine and noble view, to bring content to the eyes and the restfulness of all spacious and beautiful places to the heart.

One June evening, not many years ago, the two Misses Plues had climbed the steep path from their house to the Green Bench and were sitting in that place of pilgrimage discussing a domestic event whose importance had certainly never been overtopped in their simple lives.

The Bench stood about ten feet back from the edge of the little niche in the moor which the sisters, after weeks of heart-searching discussion, had selected for its site, and the years that had passed since its completion had sufficed to make of the man-hollowed half-circle behind it a thing of beauty.

Tufted, irregularly-placed clumps of grass covered the greater part of its earthen nakedness. A flat-leafed creeper had festooned its upper edge, and in the deeper

recesses of the little excavation flowers grew in all the seasons with singular abundance. Just now purple-red cranesbill, and a thick-growing yellow flower of glossy leaf caught the red glow of the westering sun and shone bravely back at it as it slid down the sky towards Aycliffe Head.

Above the hollow stretched the open moor, at that moment glowing with the rich color that it reveals only at evening, and full of half-unfurled fern painting it with a clear green that at that hour almost melted to gold. Below the Green Bench the winding path by which the two ladies had reached their eyrie seemed to leap downwards like a small, pebbly torrent; indeed, but for the lack of water, its stony way was precisely like that of a tiny hillside beck, and further down, below the beloved rose-colored roofs now, in the beautifying sunset light, in their second most splendid hour of the twenty-four—their most splendid hour was that of sunrise—lay spread both dales.

Off to the left, a window in Thornby Lodge blazed away as if on fire and the dim, gray-brown roofs of Warcop huddled together in an early darkness unknown to the heights.

For some time Miss Flora and Miss Effie sat silent, gazing with eyes that saw little of the familiar beauties of their home place. Miss Flora, sitting down, with her pink-flowered muslin gown gracefully settled round her, a mushroom-shaped, rose-decked hat tilted over her nose—Miss Flora hated sunburn—was, though not young, a pretty woman; pretty in a way that to a sympathetic observer was not without pathos. There was pathos in her very name, for in her youth it must have suited her deliciously; in her day she must have been a most flower-like maiden, and now in her middle-age she was still like a flower, but like one that has been pressed in a book.

She was thin almost to invisibility, but the pathos lay somehow in her sweet, faded, rather high-nosed little face. Her eyes were of a velvety dark blue and one saw clearly, by the close clinging to them of her delicately wrinkled lids, that the globes of her eyes were unusually large and set a little loosely in her head. The youth had so irrevocably departed from her skin that the child-like, unfaded blue of the irises, and the skimmed-milk color of her eyeballs, gave a pang to some sympathetic people. In mercy to the sensitive beholder these things should have grown old with the rest of her, and this they had not done.

Her delicate chin had lost its unwavering line, but there was no ugly sagging to lament, and her slightly sunken, coral-pink mouth revealed little square teeth that still flashed when she laughed.

Mr. Burns, the chemist at Middleton, alone could have told what an expenditure of money and care this flash cost its owner, but then Mr. Burns—his mother was a Watlass—never mentioned Miss Flora's hesitating, shy, bold visits to his shop in the Market Place, nor her short-sighted, nervous, excited investigation of the low glass case at the left of the door, where he kept all his tooth-powders, washes and pastes.

And as the tall, thin lady left the shop, springing along over the cobble-stones in her odd, bounding way—the way in which the goddess Flora might have half-skipped over the grass in her flower-strewing moments—she always took with her in her green-lined rush basket at least one of the latest products of the teeth-beautifying industry.

Miss Effie was very different. She was two years younger than her sister but looked to careless eyes five years older; a short, pony-built woman, with oily black hair that clung close to her head, a weather-beaten, dark

skin and teeth that were her own only by right of purchase and long possession.

Miss Effie, that June evening, wore a short gray skirt of some unpropitious woollen material and a stiffly starched blouse made very like a man's shirt. Its high collar held up her little, brown chin in a way that looked extremely uncomfortable, and its austerities were made more conspicuous by a scarlet tie that was drawn very tight at its base and hung down on her hard-looking breast. Someone once said, in describing and differentiating the two sisters, that their natures were explained to the discerning eye by the fact that, whereas Miss Effie in profile showed the average feminine curve from chin to waist and Miss Flora was if anything a little concave, yet Miss Flora's poor breast in some indescribable way looked the more feminine, the better adapted to pillow a sorrowful head. However that may be and no matter how they differed in character, the two ladies, though they possessed not only the reserve and silence of most people who, without children's faces about them, dwell in high places and alone, but also the almost tangible Yorkshire shyness, were devoted sisters.

But although they loved each other, and had spent by far the greater part of their lives under the same roof, neither of them, when unhappy, ever confided in the other. They were very Northern in their little austerities. Miss Effie was unsmiling and as monosyllabic as possible with strangers, and Miss Flora's little, soft giggle and gentle, fluttering ways covered a reserve as iron as her sister's; and now in this, their hour of extreme perplexity, when they had come to the Green Bench for the purpose of discussing their problem, they sat side by side for almost half an hour in complete silence.

The letter had arrived only two hours before; it had been brought up from Warcop by Esther Oughtenshaw,

their old servant—her mother was a Watlass—who had chanced, through a sudden need for a new frying-pan, to go down after lunch on Monday of all days. Miss Effie had read the letter and handed it to Miss Flora in silence, after which each lady went to her own room and stayed there for some time behind a closed door. At tea they said nothing about the news, but at last Miss Flora, setting down her untouched cup, asked tentatively:

"Don't you think we might walk up to the Green Bench, Effie?" And in unbroken silence they had climbed the steep path and sat down.

Finally someone walking along the Edge a hundred feet above them broke the silence that both felt almost as if it were a tangible thing, by startling a peewit who flew down the hillside uttering its wearying, raucous cry.

"That will be Thomas John Skelton driving his cows home to Flaye. It must be six, Flora."

Miss Effie's voice was a little harsh and had a queer break in it; it was a voice that seemed to suit her plain, dark face with its nearly meeting eyebrows and its faded, raspberry-colored lips.

Miss Flora raised her gloved hands and dropped them limply on her lap. After a minute she exclaimed, "Effie, what are we going to do?"

"There is nothing to do now; we cannot turn him away from the door, can we? I have told Esther to get a room ready."

"Perhaps," Miss Flora said after a pause, her troubled voice sounding, with its queer little tinkle, almost like a child's, "he won't die after all. He may get better in this air."

Miss Effie laughed unmusically. "Yes, that would be just like him."

"Oh, Effie, even Robert could not help dying!"

"I mean," Miss Effie returned, in a weighty and relentless voice, "that it would be just like him to live."

Miss Flora did not answer but her dim little face changed almost imperceptibly. "You never liked him, Effie; you were never quite fair, I think——"

Miss Effie frowned. "No," she said, "I did not like him, but that has nothing to do with this. Besides, he did not care whether I liked him or not, for there were others who did."

To Miss Flora's face came something very transitory, almost unnoticeable, something between a wince and a smile, but she was silent and Miss Effie went on:

"He says that he is dying and that he is coming to us. That implies, if I know Robert Blundell at all, that he is coming to give us the pleasure of his dying in, and being buried from, our house. That is bad, but, as I have suggested, he might do worse."

"Oh, Effie!"

Miss Effie looked gloomily at her sister, her opaque eyes curiously empty of light.

"I am sorry, Flora; I didn't mean to hurt you; of course you never saw through him, you never see through anyone, and naturally you do not see through him. And I—*did!*"

Again the strange, half-flinching quiver touched Miss Flora's lips, but instead of speaking she rose and with her peculiar skimming step walked away and stood at the edge of the slope.

"I may not have seen through him—as you say, I am not observant," she said after a moment's silence. "Poor Bob!"

Miss Effie coughed. "He was too handsome to be anything but bad," she declared, obviously ending the discussion so far as she was concerned.

Suddenly Miss Flora turned and, clasping her hands,

"He was too handsome to be anything but bad," she declared.

held them up before her and began to speak in her highest pitched voice.

"Augustus Cæsar, Titus Vespasianus, Philippe le Bel of France, Edward the Fourth of England, Alcibiades of Athens, or was it Aristides?—no, he was the just one—were all great and good men, and yet the most beautiful men of their time."

Her excited triumph attracted the attention of Miss Effie, who, used to her sister's ways, had relapsed into a somber contemplation of the dale.

"How on earth," Miss Effie asked, "do you know about those men, Flora Plues?"

"Bacon, Lord Bacon, Verulam, he said it. I read it the other day at the Vicarage."

Far away up the dale to the left, a small black speck now broke the monotony of the dusty road; a carriage of some kind. Before Miss Effie had time to answer Miss Flora had seen this speck, and Lord Bacon vanished from her mind.

"Effie, it is the fly—look, just there this side of the Mill. It will be them!"

Miss Effie rose. "Nonsense, he has no money to waste on flies, and the carrier's cart is comfortable enough for anyone. The train is not due till *six*-forty-five anyway."

"Effie, I feel it is him!"

"You feel it is *he* if you feel anything," Miss Effie returned grimly, "which you don't. However, he—*they*—will be here by eight, so we had better go down. After all, there is no good discussing it, we can't refuse to take them in. Come!"

At the edge of the path they both stood still, looking at each other, in each face an expectant look.

"Effie——"

"Flora——"

Miss Flora gave a little skip, "No, we *must* be kind to him for poor May's sake, and perhaps he has improved."

Miss Effie drew her brows closely together and protruded her discolored lower lip. "Such men," she declared, "never improve. However, as you say, for poor May's sake—and then"—she broke off, her dark face melting in an extraordinary way, her voice gentling almost to a whisper, "there is the baby."

They made their way down the footpath, the stones rolling from under their feet and clattering against each other, Miss Flora's face saddened by a little smile that meant nothing, Miss Effie's settled into its usual aspect of grimness.

"I hope," Miss Flora broke out suddenly as they crossed the road, "that it will be fair, like poor May——"

They opened the little wicket gate, after crossing a hundred yards of common land that lay between it and the road, and went up the garden path to the house. At the door under the rose-covered porch, stood Esther Oughtenshaw, their old servant, waiting for them.

"I was just cooming oop to t' Green Bench to seek you, Miss Effie," she said, holding out a telegram. "Mary Christie's girl brought un oop——"

Miss Effie took the telegram and opened it, although it was addressed to Miss Plues and she was two years younger than her sister, and as she read the message, Miss Flora tiptoed delicately away and stooped over a tree of yellow roses, inhaling their scent with tactful ostentation.

"Flora!"

"Yes, Effie?"

The two women stood looking at each other, Esther Oughtenshaw, her apron rolled up over her arms, plainly waiting for the news.

"You are right, Flora, they are coming in the Red Dragon fly. It *was* they you saw."

"Oh, but I was only guessing, Effie; I could not possibly *know*, could I? It was only my luck to be right!" Miss Flora constantly referred to her luck though no one could have said of what it consisted.

To this small apology Miss Effie vouchsafed no acknowledgment. She turned to Esther, whose red, old face wa alight with an interest she naturally shared with her two mistresses, and gave some hasty orders. A moment later she turned to her sister and asked her not snappishly, not sourly, but with a curious lack of tenderness, why she was cutting roses from Father's rose-tree.

Miss Flora, who had taken off her hood, and whose bright, brindled hair was shining like silver in the sun, tripped to the far side of the rose bush and bent over it, thus not looking at Miss Effie.

"I think—I remember *he* used to like Father's roses," she murmured.

Miss Effie gave a slight grunt and went indoors.

A few minutes later the ladies, issuing from their rooms, both of which lay at the front of the house, met in the broad corridor; Miss Flora was all in white; Miss Effie had smoothed her hair and washed her face and hands, but she still wore the gray skirt and the hard, unbecoming shirt with the cut-throat collar.

"Your new gown, Flora!"

Poor Miss Flora blushed and twiddled her dry old fingers, on which, in a very mild way, sparkled several old-fashioned rings. "I thought it would look more hospitable," she protested.

"It does, oh, it undoubtedly does that!" returned the other as they went down the shining shallow stairs, past the plaster bust of Lord Byron on the window-seat, "and

what is more, he would be flattered, oh, aye, flattered that you would wish to look your best for him. He will also see," she added, a note of venom in her voice, "that I—didn't."

"I don't think," Miss Flora answered gently, "that he ever *thought* you wanted to look your best for him, Effie."

"I am sure he never did—hark!" she broke off in a different voice, "do you hear it—that will be they!"

At that moment Esther Oughtenshaw came out of her kitchen, clattering over the stone floor of the hall.

"Miss Effie, Miss Flora, it's cooming! It's just at t' old may-tree! I can see from the kitchen window——"

"Please return to the kitchen, Esther," Miss Effie answered, every inch the mistress. "When I need you I will ring."

A few moments later the old-fashioned fly crept up past the kitchen-garden and round to the edge of the green.

"Shall you go to the gate, Effie?" Miss Flora asked, fluttered and nervous, but Miss Effie had gone upstairs, muttering something about her handkerchief.

Thus it came about that it was Miss Flora and not Miss Effie who plucked Cuckoo Blundell out of the great thicket of nettles into which, on being lifted from the fly by the driver, she tumbled. When the child, screaming and kicking, and using language it was just as well Miss Flora could not understand, was safely withdrawn from the perfidious greenery and lay sobbing in her arms, Miss Flora turned to the fly.

"Oh, Robert," she began, shouting in a high key over the black head of the outraged child—"I am so sorry," and she broke off, for the skeleton-like man who, wrapped in furs, still sat in the fly, was lying back helpless with laughter.

"Cuckoo, Cuckoo!" he called out in French, between

two fits of apparently uncontrollable mirth. "You must not swear, or your auntie won't love you."

Miss Flora never forgot that moment; the heaving, sobbing little body in her arms, the wet face against her own freshly-powdered neck, the grinning flyman—Matthew Christie's son from Stebley Old Hall, she saw it was—and, framed in the fly window, full in the merciless western light, the dreadful, cadaverous face of Robert Blundell.

His once beautiful nose had dwindled to a waxen, hook-like thing; his eyes, crinkled with laughter, lay in deep hollows that looked black. Between his pale, flat lips she could see his yellow teeth with gaps towards the back, and his tongue, pointed and dark-looking, lifted like a snake's head, rigid with the paroxysm of laughter.

CHAPTER II

POOR Miss Flora stole away out of the house after supper and crept down the hillside to the river, where she sat under a may-tree and gave herself up to thought. Supper had been dreadful, although Robert Blundell had appeared in no way oppressed by the situation—he was a south-country man, and as such, of course, lighter in spirit and mind than if he had had the good fortune to belong to Yorkshire—and his talk flowed along in a steady, shallow stream just as it had done in the old days. Conversationally, he had jumped from Paris to St. Petersburg, thence to Hyères, and on to Spain, and then, to settle for a while, to Avignon where the child had been born.

"We had a wee cottage down by the river," he explained gaily, "with little canal-like threads of water all round. It reminded us of Holland and of Venice, and me of Japan—rather like living in a paddy-field, it was."

Miss Flora, her head on one side, tried to look as if she knew all about the paddy plant as she mentally called it, but a blunt question from Miss Effie elicited the information that no such plant existed.

"It's rice, you know," Blundell explained, "grows in swamps; half-naked natives with hats like big mushrooms wading about in it. Oh, not in Avignon," he added, an amused grin scoring his skull-like face with deep lines; "in Japan, that is."

"I should have thought that such excessive damp must have been bad for your illness," commented Miss Effie dryly.

Through the open windows the last of the summer daylight fell full on the man's face, so tragic in its emaciation, so much more tragic in its expression of hopefulness and sociability. Poor Miss Flora could not eat. Her thin throat, embellished in honor of the guest with a string of facetted, purple rock crystals, worked nervously; something was preventing her from swallowing.

Miss Effie ate as usual though better than usual, for Esther Oughtenshaw had made a little feast to celebrate the arrival of Poor Miss May's Husband, and besides the eternal cold mutton that in the south would have been called lamb, new potatoes and salad, she had managed to "borrow" a few trout from Mrs. William Christie—who had been an Oughtenshaw—and the little beauties, boiled and with butter sauce, were greatly enjoyed by the invalid. The gooseberry-fool caused a moment of emotion, for it was served in the little handleless blue-and-white cups that Blundell remembered as having been favorites of his wife in her maiden days.

"Ah," he cried as he saw them, "poor May's Chinese cups; how she loved them!"

His feverish, bright eyes closed for a moment; he flourished at them with an extremely fine cambric handkerchief and went on talking about something else. But Miss Effie and Miss Flora could not take the reference so lightly. Their eyes were dry but their lips stiffened for a moment and Miss Flora's throat made a violent movement; neither of the ladies spoke for several seconds. They rarely referred to their dead sister and when they did, it was in a certain way, in certain voices, almost in a certain language; Robert's emotionality offended them nearly as much as did the quickness of his recovery; they disliked his wiping his eyes.

Miss Flora was still under the influence of this episode

when she stole away in the lucent evening and went down to the river.

Even here the view was noble; an ample spread of broad-looking, uncrowded moors rose on all sides, and to her left lay the village, Warcop, with its three old bridges and its broad, irregular green, some three miles from where she sat under the may-tree.

The sounds reaching her were the lowing of cows as they marched steadily back to their pasture-lands after milking, and the voices of sheep farther away, the small cries of the lambs sounding in the distance almost like the tinkle of little bells. Opposite her, far up, two cows, a white one and a brown one, stood against the sky-line. She knew whose they were and her vaguely-drifting thoughts turned for a minute to Joss Skelton's over the Ridge; she wondered how poor Lizzie Skelton was, and if the poor little baby that had come too soon would live or die. Then her mind flew back to the queer, dark child now asleep in the blue room at Roseroofs.

The child knew, to the surprise of the sisters, but little English, and Miss Flora's French was fragmentary and apt to retreat in confusion at the approach of what she innocently considered a French accent, so she had been able to make but little headway with her small niece. Luckily, Miss Effie had once lived for three years at Angoulême, so she could, at least, make herself understood.

Blundell seemed to be amused with the difficulty of communication between his sisters-in-law and his very diminutive daughter. "It is a good thing you cannot understand her," he remarked casually, as the little creature stamped and vociferously refused her food, "she is swearing like a pirate, you know——"

Then it appeared that the child was demanding cheese for her supper.

"It certainly is cheese," Miss Effie declared, in a puzzled voice. "*Fromage*—isn't it, Bob?"

It was the first time either of the sisters had made use of the old nickname, but Miss Flora at least did not notice it, and Blundell himself did not appear to.

"Yes, it is cheese," he returned; "she has been for nearly a year on a farm near Orange, with her foster mother you know, while I was in Switzerland at that damned place in the snow—I beg your pardon," he added in a purely perfunctory way, "she is used to cheese."

And cheese she obtained by the time-tested plan of roaring till she got it.

Miss Flora made sure that cheese must prove fatal to a child of four and Esther Oughtenshaw tried to sidetrack Miss Cuckoo's attentions to the joys of bread and jam, but all in vain.

"Give her a slab of cheese," the insouciant parent suggested, as he stood, his hands in his trousers-pockets, in a pose both the sisters vividly remembered, looking on as all his life he had seemed to look on at everything, "no bread, just a lump of cheese, they eat it like that in France;" and the pacified though tear-mottled Cuckoo had proved the truth of his words by eating as much cheese as the two sisters, with the usual aids of bread and water, could have consumed at two meals.

Under her may-tree, a pink one in all the fragrant glory of its first flowering, Miss Flora thought despairingly of the cheese, and sighed.

Meantime, in the long, low, faded drawing-room which, shabby and worn as it was, seemed to have absorbed some of the sun that had faded it, so mellow-looking was it, sat Miss Effie and Robert Blundell, facing the western sky that even now at nine o'clock was glowing as if with the memory of its just departed beauty.

Miss Effie sat in her own chair, a so-called easy chair, covered with yellow-and-white chintz of a recent purchase, which seemed in its flashing coloring to cause the old curtains, chairs and sofas, to pale with shame at their own shabbiness.

Blundell sat opposite his hostess in an old, low, long-seated basket-chair, which he had not forgotten, in the seven years of his absence, as the most comfortable one in the house. His very long legs stretched out across the floor were painful to see in their horrible thinness; the knees stood out like cobble-stones under the thin blue serge of his trousers, and the way the cloth fell in above as well as below the knees made his fleshlessness cruelly apparent. He lay back at full length, his hands clasped behind his dark head and his bright, hollow eyes nearly closed. He was very carefully studying Miss Effie's face, a fact unobserved by her as she gazed fixedly out of the window to where the purple shadows creeping up Aycliffe Head announced that night had come, despite the glories of the sky.

"How old are you, Effie?"

The words seemed to his hearer to ring out like a pistol-shot. Miss Effie turned and looked at him.

"What do you say, Robert?" she asked icily.

A graceless grin flashed over the man's face but his apology was prompt and adroit. "I beg your pardon, my dear," he said, "I was thinking aloud. I was only thinking that you seem not a day older than you did at the wedding."

"Do I not? Yet it is seven years."

"It is, and so far as I am concerned, except for my memories of *you* it might be seventy. Poor Flora has aged, you know," he added dreamily, but with a wary gleam in his eyes.

Miss Effie made a little movement and frowned; he

knew that she was ashamed of the pang of gratification his words gave her.

"You are good, as always, to take us in," he went on, using his opportunity in the half innocent, half reprehensible way he had used his opportunity all his life. "I was half afraid you might refuse."

Then Miss Effie, to punish herself for her base feeling of a moment before, spoke out and hurt herself. "You gave me no chance to refuse, even if I had wanted to, Robert," she returned.

Blundell burst out laughing and his laughter, though his speaking voice was husky and weak, had kept something of its old ringing quality.

"So I didn't! Ah, Effie, you have indeed not changed!"

Drawing his chair closer to hers, he sat up and joining his long, thin hands looked at her across them.

"Effie," he began very seriously, "I am remarkably well—for me—to-night, but it is quite on the cards that I may be too ill to speak to-morrow. Let us have a little talk this evening, just you and me."

"Very well, Robert."

"You were all of you very good to me, in the old days, even Marcia, but I think you know that you were always my favorite—after May."

"After May," she repeated quietly. "Was I? Well?"

"So when that medico in Switzerland told me to come home and make my soul, and I had to arrange Cuckoo's life for her, poor little thing, as best I could, I thought of you."

She did not speak for a moment, and then she said:

"Why not of Flora?—it was always Flora who was your friend, who took your part against Marcia, and sometimes against me."

"I know, I know, but I want *you* to love and care for

my poor little thing; I want you to teach her, Effie, as you used to teach the Bingham girls. Will you?"

Her face softened and he watched her as he went on. "I saw Viola Bingham two or three years ago in Seville —Lady Didcot she is now—and I thought then how beautifully she had been educated; she talked to me about you, and said she wished she could find a Miss Plues for her own girls——"

As he paused, he could hear Esther Oughtenshaw singing a Wesleyan hymn in the kitchen and listened for a moment, for the old woman's voice was still beautiful.

Presently he heard Miss Effie speak.

"Lord and Lady Gifford say that Flora was a wonderful governess." At something in her voice he looked up at her.

"Flora was always on your side," she went on, "it was always she who was your friend, Robert, not I."

"Dear Effie, how appallingly honest you are; need you so insist on never having liked me? It seems hard when I always so greatly liked you——"

But his blandishing voice had no effect on her; her face looked as hard as one of the gray stones that edged the garden paths.

"I thought it right to remind you, Robert. I feel Flora would do her very best for Cuckoo. Is that her real name, Robert?"

In the growing dusk he leaned still further forward in his chair, and his ravaged face filled with dark hollows and lines was almost terrifying to her.

"No, she was christened Nicoleta, for my grandmother who, you may remember, was an Italian and who brought me up. It was poor May who called her Cuckoo."

After a moment he took her bony hand in his own, the quality of whose boniness was so different from that of

hers, and his voice fell to a depth at which for a moment it nearly lost its huskiness.

"Effie," he pleaded, "you won't refuse to take care of Cuckoo? Remember she is not only mine; she is half May's."

"I know, Robert."

"And on the other hand," he went on urgently, "just because she *is* mine, she will need the wisest care." After a pause he added, "What was it you called me that time?"

Whatever her words had been, she would not let him repeat them.

"Don't, Bob," she cried, "don't talk about things that are dead and gone years ago! Tell me what you want me to do, what you want me to do *now*, and I'll try to do it—for May's sake."

He raised her hand to his lips, and at their hard and dry touch she shivered; it was like the touch of a dead leaf.

"I want you," he said, after a moment, lying back again in his chair and speaking very gravely, "to try to counteract the *Me* in her; to harden and toughen her fiber if you can; to make her like yourself."

Miss Effie nodded slowly. She said: "I quite understand. Poor May was—not very strong, either, and—— I will try. But—Robert," she added a moment later, in a softer tone, "Flora must not know of this talk. She was always your friend, you know, and she will want a share in bringing up the little Nicoleta. Do you see what I mean?"

Of course he saw. Robert Blundell had always seen at once what people meant, and with all his faults he had, to do him justice, often seen the nobility of things he had never even attempted to emulate. He was not being single-hearted, even now at the end of his life, but he meant what he said.

"You mean that dear Flora must not know that I want my child to have your strength and your resolution rather than her—her sweet ways? Of course she must not. And I give you my word," he added, rising, "that I will never mention this talk to her. Hush, here she comes."

Half an hour later, when the moon had risen and Miss Effie had been called to the kitchen to see Joss Skelton, who had come over the hill and up to Roseroofs for some advice about his sick wife, Blundell drew Miss Flora into the garden.

"I want to smell the sweet stocks," he said, plucking at her sleeve in the boyish way she remembered.

"But you will catch cold," she protested, as she lit the candles on the mantelpiece, "sit down, and I will get you a beaten-up egg."

"If you knew how my soul sickens at the mere sound of the words 'beaten-up egg' you would not say that—come along into the garden, there's a dear Flora."

Miss Flora left off swaying from her heels to her toes and back: "Will you put on a hat?"

"I will."

They went out through the window and walked down to the front of the house on the dew-wet, mossy, flagged path. The night-scented stocks grew in a clump by the wall and there the two stood, looking up the dale to the left. Suddenly Blundell said, "Flora, I want you to do me a favor."

She looked at him, her sweet eyes bright in her faded face. "I will if I can, Robert."

"Say Bob."

"Bob, then; what is it?"

"Well, it is about my poor little mouse, Cuckoo. I want you to take care of her and teach her."

Miss Flora fluttered her head. "But I have not taught

a child for nearly thirty years, and I fear I was nev . ery good at *instruction.* Besides, I have forgotten how."

"Nonsense."

"But I have. No, no, *Effie* is the clever one, Robert —Bob. She will do it; she is strong and wise, whereas I," she made a sweet little gesture, and her eyes filled with tears, "I was never clever, you know, and now—I am old as well."

Blundell was touched. "You are a sweet, good, gentle woman," he said, with conviction, "and I love your ways. Have it as you like, my dear. Let Effie teach her to be strong as you say, but—you know that after poor May, you were always my favorite, Flora. Teach her to be sweet and gentle like you."

Miss Flora blushed vividly. "Oh, Bob, do you really think—that?"

"I know it, and I want my poor little Cuckoo to be like you. Effie is firm, and strong, and good, but I want Cuckoo to learn to sit and sew, to embroider—and I want her to be gentle and—and sweet, Flora."

In this he was perfectly sincere, just as he had been sincere with Miss Effie. He had always had this odd, valueless gift of temporary sincerity.

"Try to make her gentle, will you, Flora?" he went on, "she is a hard little nut"—and Miss Flora promised.

Then she added, "I think poor Effie might be hurt if she knew how you felt, Bob; she *is* so good and fine under her slight—how shall I say?—roughness——"

Blundell took her delicate hand and laying it on his arm led her back to the window, through which a yellow light now poured.

"I give you my word of honor, Flora," he said seriously, "that I will never tell Effie a word of our talk. I must go to bed now, I am more tired than you can know."

Raising her two hands in his, he bowed his dark head over them in the graceful way that had so struck her when he had come to Roseroofs seven years before as poor May's promised husband, and kissed them.

"Good-night," he said, "and God bless you."

CHAPTER III

BLUNDELL grew better in the clear upland air, and for some time it looked as if his were to be one of the marvellous cures the proud memory of which is cherished by the natives of every particularly healthful place.

Old Mrs. Bridlegoose of Brown End—her mother was a Skelton—recalled for Esther Oughtenshaw's benefit the story of Sam Christie's Gentleman, who forty years before came to the dale in a dying condition and lived to return every year for just twenty-two years, when he was killed in a carriage-accident.

"His loongs were a'most goan, t'London Doctor said, but old Dr. Dawes set him oop—t'old doctor an' t'dale air."

This beautiful and cheering tale Esther Oughtenshaw brought to Blundell, under whose spell she was quite helpless, and though he laughed at it and assured her that he personally had not enough lung left to make a pen-wiper, yet he had liked it.

The sisters took great care of their self-invited guest. The big basket-chair filled with cushions whose green and mauve canvas covers had been embroidered by their mother in her young days, was carried every morning into the garden and in it Robert Blundell practically lived. He and it followed the progress of the sun, moving with the shade from one to another of the trees; and Esther Oughtenshaw had added to her manifold duties the new one of watching the sun, to which end her pleasant old face might have been seen every half-hour or so peer-

ing out of one window or another, inspecting what she plainly considered the newly-adopted vagaries of a hitherto sober luminary.

"Surely, 'tisn't more than ten minutes," she would mutter as she sallied forth, drying her hands on her blue-and-white apron, "since I shifted him, and there sits the poor gentleman in a champion blaze." And when Esther had conveyed the chair and the pillows from the dwindling shade of his last shelter to a new and more full-bodied oasis, one or the other of the sisters would settle the invalid in his chair and coax the old pillows into a nest of comfort over which he never ceased to exclaim. Not once did he forget to thank Esther Oughtenshaw for moving what he always called, although it was of basket-work, "that heavy chair"; and Esther, though she could have given no reason for it, liked to hear him call the chair heavy. Poor Blundell, in spite of his manifold sins and wickednesses, had always been a popular man and the reason was probably that he was what the Wiskedale people call, with no reference whatever to money, generous.

He had always asked and assumed much, but his thanks were sincere and warm; he was a man of ample gratitudes.

The garden of Roseroofs was a little unkempt, for old Benjie Brigworthy, the gardener, was a communal possession and "did" for Dr. Loxley, the Vicar of Widdybank; for Mr. Briggs, the Lord of the Manor's agent; for old Miss Dawes, the Doctor's sister; and came to Roseroofs only twice a week; but Miss Flora and Miss Effie were both fond of flowers and worked in the garden themselves, so that it was always, except in the very depth of winter, full of flowers of some kind. Moreover, Miss Effie and Miss Flora had each a special garden, the plots they had been given and taught to cultivate as children,

and these plots were the objects of their specialized attention and skill.

It had better be explained that Roseroofs did not look out at the dale view with its front windows, but with those at the back, from the dining-room windows and the end drawing-room window; the two other drawing-room windows faced directly to the west. To the left of the garden gate stood a small copper beech, and beyond, after crossing a little grass plot to the left, one came to the kitchen garden, which was overlooked by the kitchen and scullery windows; and just to the right of the gate, on entering, was Miss Effie's garden. Here grew the sweet stocks and, in the spring, tulips. Amongst Miss Effie's treasures, as the seasons advanced, were red roses, hollyhocks, sunflowers and chrysanthemums.

By a tacit understanding, dating from the days when Miss Effie's hair was cropped and pushed off her bony brow by a round comb and Miss Flora's hung to the waist in two attenuated pigtails, Miss Flora had in her garden no tulips, and no red roses, and no chrysanthemums. In return for this abstention Miss Effie eschewed wild hyacinths, daffodils, pink roses and the double white violets that in the Spring were Miss Flora's special joy.

Sometimes, with a certain air, not perhaps of solemnity, but of a high holiday, Miss Flora presented Miss Effie with a nosegay of The Violets, or of the pink roses that grew so lavishly on her two old trees. More rarely Miss Effie without a word would put at Miss Flora's place at breakfast a few tulips standing stiffly in a favorite old glass vase of their mother's, or, later in the year, a tuft of chrysanthemums. To the two ladies their garden was a place of real beauty and romance.

Sheltered as it was from the east and north winds, roses of various sorts flourished exceedingly, the great tree of yellow roses known as Father's rose-tree being one of the

finest in the country-side, and on the front wall of the house where the study windows directly faced the gate, there stood a row of old moss-roses that bloomed throughout the summer and then continued their career, embalmed by Miss Flora in salt and spices in old Chinese jars with gilded and perforated tops, in the drawing-room.

Poor Blundell loved flowers—he had always been a man of pleasant tastes—and that last summer he enjoyed them to his heart's full content. On the little mahogany sewing-table that followed him about from shady place to shady place there always stood beside his books, his newspapers, his cigarette and match-boxes and his bottle of medicine, either a vase or a bowl of flowers.

Miss Flora, when it was her turn to beautify the table, usually chose a bowl; she loved best what she called bowl flowers. Violets are bowl flowers, and pansies; so are the delicate wild hyacinths called blue-bells to the despair, one is told, of Scottish folk; and marsh marigolds, and moon daisies. Miss Effie's own garden, of course, Miss Flora never touched, but there were pansies in both, as well as roses and many other flowers, and Miss Effie, whose affections were fixed on a tall old vase of beautiful Irish glass, would fill it with geraniums and stocks or lilac or delphiniums, and then with her solid, springless gait, she would carry her offering to wherever Blundell might be installed and set it down on the table with a little bang.

"There," she would say, "these are not very fine ones, but they are the best we have got," which was thoroughly insincere, for Miss Effie was convinced that the Roseroofs flowers could not be beaten anywhere.

So the warm, still days passed by, and the fine air and the vital palpitant silences of the moorland did indeed rest and heal the invalid's nerves, although his lungs were too far gone to be helped. It pleased him to watch the details of the simple lives around him; he learned how interested

one could be in the weather in places where the weather is so important; no one ever came to the house, man or woman, without a few words on the all-engrossing subject.

"Marning, sir, a bit windy, but a champion marning," or, "It's a soony day—will be doing you good, sir," or, "Ah, didn't mooch like the sunset last night, sir, a bit too cloudy in t' west, but mebbe it'll fine up later," and Blundell found himself enjoying these little talks and looking out for them. He had, moreover, seen too much of the world not to value the independence of the dalesmen, and he liked the burr in their mournful, musical voices. Benjie Brigworthy, a cross-grained, pugnacious, tough old man of seventy, was his special joy, and Benjie soon got used to what he called poor Miss May's husband's foony wa-ays and the two often had long talks together.

Mr. Brigworthy was a Tory of very decided views; Robert Blundell had no political convictions but his lines had generally fallen in liberal places; and he found himself, to his own delight, becoming very angry with the old gardener's antediluvian viewpoints. The old fellow was pig-headed and advanced but little on his grandfather's beliefs, but he was a regular reader of a Tory paper, and some of his language, when goaded by the unprincipled Blundell, was in its unbridled wrath a source of exquisite delight to the latter, who, to lead him on, shamelessly professed principles that would have appeared liberal even to Marat in his heyday. But in spite of these diversions, Blundell was a good deal alone, rather to his own surprise, for he fully realized himself to be the pleasant fellow he was, and knew that against his peculiar charm even extreme old age was no safeguard to women.

This charm of his, a thing not wholly reprehensible and possessed of certain delightfully innocent qualities as

well as of others, had been compared by somebody years ago—for Robert Blundell was over forty—to a bird that he kept in a cage and gave wing to at will. If he wished to be liked—and he had almost always wished to be liked by almost everybody—he had only to open the door of the cage and the bird would fly out to whistle and beguile away prejudices and disapprovals, and to inculcate in their stead likings of various kinds and degrees, of some of which their object only too soon wearied. And now, in his solitude, he opened his cage and let forth his bird, but its lure failed with Miss Effie and Miss Flora. Kind they were to him, considerate, the best of hostesses; but day after day Miss Flora passed him, light-footed, with her absurd air of antique youth, telling him that she was going for a walk, and he would not see her for hours, when she would come bounding across the green to the gate without the least sign of fatigue.

While her sister was away, Miss Effie usually brought her sewing—Miss Effie sewed for the poor, in the relentless ways of other days, utilitarian garments that Robert would shudder at—and for a short half-hour would sit by him, bolt upright in a wooden-seated chair. And as she sewed, her needle being, he was sure, much noisier than other needles, she would discuss with him her plans for the education of the child.

Cuckoo, with her dark, forbidding aspect, would be either playing at some solitary little game in the sunniest spot she could find, or in the kitchen with Esther Oughtenshaw, whose society she, without shame, preferred to that of her aunts.

Neither Miss Effie, nor Miss Flora, nor Blundell himself, had ever referred to the subject of their two conversations on the evening of his arrival. His mind was quiet on the subject; he knew the two women and trusted them as they deserved, and they trusted him as he would not

have deserved but for the fact that in this particular case it was to his own interest to keep silent.

Cuckoo was to begin reading as soon as she had learned English. Miss Flora was to teach her writing, because Miss Effie had a great admiration for her sister's delicate, slanting, so-called Italian hand. The use of the globes and history were also to lie in Miss Effie's province. Miss Flora would teach her to play the piano.

Blundell's gravity was a thing to be admired when Miss Flora's musical accomplishments were under discussion. He had heard Miss Flora play.

Embroidery the child was to learn by her father's special request.

"I'd like her to do flowers as Flora does," he said once, "not those dreadful scratchy things you make, Effie." And Miss Effie agreed, but further than such skirtings of the subject, they never approached to their pact and Blundell knew that the matter was settled once and for all.

His talks with Miss Flora were of the same kind, and it had come naturally to pass that Miss Flora should have more to do with the young Nicoleta than her sister, for the young Nicoleta, nearly as grim and silent as her aunt Effie, in a miniature way, had taken a violent dislike to that lady and showed what was to Miss Flora an almost sinfully gratifying preference for *la jolie tante*. They never dared ask what the child privately called Miss Effie and for the most part she referred to her as "she"—"elle," as she said in her strange, deep, husky voice.

One afternoon both sisters, a very unusual thing, were sitting under the great ash that stood in the southeast corner of the garden, in coming to which from the gate one passed Miss Flora's garden.

The winter had been a severe one, and the spring cor-

respondingly slow in coming, so that even yet the may-tree by the wall was in full flower. From the Green Bench, Miss Flora had just told Blundell, it looked like an immense snowball.

Blundell lay stretched out in his chair, a long figure in a suit—secretly considered by both sisters to be not quite the thing—of shantung silk, and on two of the purgatorial old wheel-backed chairs from the dining-room, Miss Effie and Miss Flora sat sewing. Near them stood a fourth chair, a Chippendale with a cushion in it, from that deserted haunt, the study.

Both ladies showed in their apparel signs of an impending guest, for Miss Flora, whose mauve-and-white-flowered frock was obviously just from the tub and the iron, had on all her rings, and Miss Effie wore what Blundell, in his sympathetic reprobate bones, felt, though he had never seen it before, to be her Best. It was a gray poplin painfully ill-adapted to Miss Effie's sallow and weather-burned skin. Moreover, Blundell's skilled eyes told him that the cut of the thing was of all cuts the most unpropitious to Miss Effie's square and heavily-built body. There was no drapery to hide the angles, nothing to soften the flatness of the hips or the prominence of the shoulder-blades. A fichu would do it, Blundell thought pityingly, some nice, soft stuff over the shoulders, and crossed in front—nevertheless, Miss Effie was *en grande tenue*, for her little flat collar, so useless as an aid to beauty, was of valuable old lace and it was fastened by a brooch, a large and beautiful topaz set in chased gold.

"Effie," Miss Flora said suddenly, looking up from the great strip of delicate lawn on which she was embroidering fuchsias in their natural colors, "you really will have to speak to her, she is singing again——"

Round the corner of the kitchen came Esther Oughtenshaw's voice raised in praise of her Maker.

"Why stop her, Flora?" Blundell asked lazily; "it is really beautiful——"

"Flora knows that, Robert—we know about Esther's voice. She sings in the choir at Warcop and everyone admires it. It is Marcia she is thinking of."

Miss Effie finished the hideous little garment she was working on and, taking off her thimble, folded her work. "Flora is afraid of shocking Marcia with our country ways," she said.

Miss Flora looked up hastily, her eyes flashing. Blundell saw that for some reason Miss Effie's remark had hurt her, but she said nothing and a few moments later she rose, folded her really beautiful embroidery, and laying it in the deep-green baize drawer of the sewing-table, went into the house.

"Tell Esther to be careful with the tea-cakes," Miss Effie called after her.

"It strikes me *you* are afraid of the *tea-cakes* shocking Marcia," the invalid said idly, watching her with half-closed eyes.

"Marcia is very particular and she has every right to be; she is used to the best of everything, living in London," returned Miss Effie grimly.

"I know she is, but what a bad argument! To my mind it is people who have had the *worst* of everything who have the right to be particular——"

Miss Effie did not answer, and this, her unconscious North-country way of meeting an incontrovertible or even a merely troublesome argument, made him ill at ease.

"Cuckoo," he called out to end the situation, "Cuckoo, where are you?"

But it was Esther Oughtenshaw who, her head thrust out of the dining-room window, gave Blundell the information that the child had been digging in the kitchen-garden and that Miss Flora was at that moment en-

gaged in removing from her the signs of her labors. Miss Effie rose.

"I must go and watch for the carriage from the blue-room window," she said. "I can see it when it gets to the turning by the big may-tree and that is just time to mash the tea——"

Left alone, Blundell whistled softly to himself; the prospect of Lady Fabricius' visit annoyed and bored him, for he knew that it meant the end of his lazy and happy time. She could not force him to walk, or even to sit upright, for that would be practically murdering him, but he would have to speak loud, instead of murmuring as he liked to do—for she was a little deaf and no one was allowed to know it—and she would expect him to be grateful to her for coming all this way to see him.

He was not uncommon in feeling gratitude an impossible achievement when it was demanded of him, and in ordinary circumstances he would have run away at the first news of her impending visit, but he was dying, and he must put his house in order so far as he could and Lady Fabricius would help him. At this point in his very unusual meditations, he smiled and corrected the phrase.

"No, it is putting the poor Flora's and the poor Effie's house in order! It is *they* who will have all the trouble. The two hundred pounds a year won't hurt old Marcia—she will never miss it—and they, Heaven help 'em, will have Cuckoo." For a moment he reflected on this point, half sorry, half amused, and then, still smiling, and very slowly, he rose.

Lady Fabricius' reception was as majestic as his own progress as, leaning on her maid's arm, she came across the little common to the gate.

At the gate stood Miss Effie and Miss Flora and Blundell, whose irrepressible theater-sense had induced him to

make an effort. Indeed, he was amply rewarded for his pains, for not only did he, with his incorrigible inward eye, clearly see the impression his gaunt and moribund person must make, side by side with the gracile Miss Flora and the grim and solid Miss Effie, but Lady Fabricius at once expressed her satisfaction with his tribute to the effect of her arrival, by telling him that she was delighted to see him looking so well!

This remark was so characteristic of the speaker that he had the unusual joy of catching a hasty, shame-faced glance between Miss Effie and Miss Flora, a glance whose grandmother, so to speak, he remembered on the occasion of his marriage festivities, seven years before.

"I brought Charlotte, you see," Lady Fabricius explained, a trifle unnecessarily, as she was at that moment being supported to the little colony of chairs under the ash-tree by Charlotte herself, "I thought my French woman might frighten Esther."

"Nothing would frighten Esther," Blundell heard himself saying; "not even the Almighty."

"Robert!"

It was Marcia who protested, though he knew with instant regret that his profanity must have hurt Miss Effie and Miss Flora, whereas Lady Fabricius' exclamation was a ready-made one and meant nothing. Esther, when she brought tea the next moment, appeared to verify his unfortunately-expressed belief, for setting down the tray she turned to Lady Fabricius, and shaking hands with her, said unabashed and heartily: "Aye, a'm glad to see yer, Miss Marcia—my lady—and yer looking fine for yer yeers, and fat an' all——"

Her ladyship, who was indeed very fat with the kind of fat which seems to engulf the personality, had turned her back on the old servant who was yet younger than

she. References to her bulk were as unwelcome to her as they are to most people.

This was an exquisite moment for Blundell, and put out of his mind for a while the worrying thought of Cuckoo. Cuckoo, he knew, was a dreadful child, and he realized how much more dreadful her dreadfulness would appear to Lady Fabricius than it did to her sisters. Flora's odd, old youthfulness would, he was sure, eventually arrive at winning the child's admiration, for Cuckoo admired or disliked, as yet; she had not begun to show a disposition to love. Although the dark imp obviously did not admire her Aunt Effie, she had already manifested certain minute signs of a wholesome awe of that lady, as well as of a slight softening of demeanor towards Miss Flora, *la jolie tante.*

About Lady Fabricius, who in a way was the most important of the three, Blundell had grave fears. Many years ago, before he had met her, Marcia Plues had been a beauty, but now her young and middle-aged beauties had gone for ever; gone to be replaced by that ugliest and most pitiful of travesties, a travesty of the beauty of youth.

Cuckoo was only four, yet her father felt, as he lay back in his chair watching Lady Fabricius satisfying her hunger and thirst with a voracity that was rather unpleasant, that those sloe-black eyes of his daughter's could detect as quickly as his own had detected them, the meretricious attempts at red-brown hair, the patina of white and pink that vainly tried to hide the sagging and the wrinkles of her eldest aunt's sixty-year-old skin. "You cannot put new wine into old bottles," he mused, hiding his unmanageable mouth with one hand, "neither can you put old faces into new skins." But he could hold his tongue and Cuckoo very probably could not, or would not. Luckily she knew very little English.

While the maiden sisters were asking, with the politest hunger for detail, about Sir Adolph Fabricius, Blundell slowly rose, and as slowly went into the house by the drawing-room window. He found Cuckoo sitting in the middle of the kitchen table on a small three-legged stool.

"What are you doing, Cuckoo?" he asked in French.

"I am going to see my beautiful auntie," she returned slowly, but with a marked distinctness.

Blundell was puzzled and sat down, wondering what he had better do. He had seen very little of his daughter, for during the first year of her life she had been kept away from his wife, who was dying. He had adored his wife in his unsatisfactory way, and had hardly left her from the beginning of her illness, near the bridge where, according to the old song, "*On danse, on danse.*"

The day after the funeral he and Anne Rose Ponchaux, the child's *nounou* and subsequent *bonne*, had started on an endless series of little journeys, from town to town, from the sea to the mountains, vainly seeking that health which he was destined never to find.

The child, a delicate, querulous little thing, far from being a comfort to him, had been in his nerve-racked condition a perfect nuisance, and Anne Rose, realizing this, had kept her out of her father's sight as much as possible.

Twice during their travels, Blundell had broken down and been ill for months, during which time he rarely so much as set eyes on Cuckoo; and when, finally, a nice old doctor, met in a train, told him that his only chance was to live for a year in Switzerland, high up among the snows, Anne Rose Ponchaux had taken the eighteen-months-old baby to her father's farm near Orange, whence she had come two years ago, when she had done that most unusual thing among French peasants, married a foreigner, i.e., a man from another part of France. Thus

Blundell had seen very little of his motherless child, and until two or three weeks before their arrival at Roseroofs, he had not seen her at all since the day he went to Switzerland.

So there in the shady old kitchen, with its stone floor covered with black and red rugs made with short ends of cloth; its long stove with its polished steel and brass; its fine old oak table; its wheel-backed chairs and its slippery black sofa, sat that afternoon Robert Blundell and his practically unknown daughter, studying each other's faces with a gravity that, but for the man's obviously desperate ill-health, would have been ludicrous.

In her stiffly-starched white frock—a frock made in far-off Orange in clumsy imitation of the Sunday frocks of the children of the local *bourgeoisie*—the child sat on her stool, her brown hands, thin and flexile like a monkey's, folded on her knees. She wore scarlet morocco strap-over shoes, the gift of her father, and a string of coral beads hung round her dark neck. Her thick black hair had been crudely cropped by Anne Rose, and hung in an uneven line across her brow, on which showed a fine, murderous frown, fit for a Borgia. Her eyes really were like sloes, for in their unfathomable darkness was a bluish shade; they were not large eyes, and their lashes were short, and straight, and thick. Her nose was no particular shape and her mouth was drawn into a thin, cramped line. It struck her father for the first time that she was like her Aunt Effie.

"What are you doing?" he asked her at length. She looked down, and he could see her eyeballs quiver under their thick, dusky lids.

"I am waiting," she said, after a pause, in a deep, growling voice, "to see my beautiful Ant." (Esther Oughtenshaw, he knew, said "Ant.")

"I see." They regarded each other steadily for a

moment and he felt at a loss with her, just as he would have felt with some grown person. He must provide against her offending her aunt, but how should he do it? He rose and went into the scullery, shutting the door behind him.

"Esther," he said, "you have been telling her tales about her Aunt Marcia!"

Esther regarded him squarely as she went on with her work of polishing forks with a yellow powder and a toothbrush.

"Ah hov not," she said.

"But—somebody must have told her that her Aunt Marcia is beautiful."

"And so she was, sir, in her young days; well I remember——"

"Yes, I know all that, but——" he struggled with a laugh and then gave way to it. "Yes, that may all be, but her ladyship is not beautiful now, and Cuckoo will know it." Whimsically he wriggled his black eyebrows at the old servant, who looked at him with unbroken gravity.

"Aye, she will, the little bairn. She's sharp enough——"

"You see," he went on, "that what I am afraid of is—she is only just four—and if she sees that this beautiful aunt is *not* beautiful—well, she might say so. Her ladyship wouldn't like that!"

"No-o—her ladyship would not, Mr. Bloondell."

Having finished the dry-scouring of her forks and spoons, Esther Oughtenshaw took a deep pan and filled it with hot water from the brass tap in the stove. Cuckoo was still sitting on the table, staring before her in her odd immobility.

"Are you a good girl?" Esther asked, as she passed on her way back to the scullery, and Blundell was amused

to catch the impeccable Yorkshire in which the tiny creature answered.

"Aye, Esther Oughtenshaw—a'm a good girl, an' all."

Blundell lifted her down and took her on his lap by the window which, in spite of the warmth of the afternoon, was tightly closed.

"Cuckoo," he said in French, "I am going to take you to see your new aunt; she is very kind and is going to be very good to you."

The child interrupted him. "What is she going to give me?" she asked.

The solemn eagerness of her small face was very funny, but even the irrepressible Blundell did not quite laugh.

"You must not think," he informed her, with ridiculously keen appreciation of the similarity of his own viewpoint and his daughter's, "you must not think that she is going to *give* you something. Poor Auntie, she has no little girl, you must be kind and good to her." His voice faltered as he hid his face in her soft hair, which felt like the fur of some small animal and smelt of rosemary. "She is a dear old lady, you know"—("*How* furious she would be!" he broke off to himself)—"and you must not say anything about her hair or—or anything. It is rude to speak of people's looks, you know."

"I know, Father."

He sighed with relief. "Of course you do, such a big girl as you. I want to be proud of my little girl," he went on, envisaging himself, in all his pathos, as the Wifeless Man with His Child.

After a moment he added, "You are the only little girl I have, you know," and the young Cuckoo Blundell, after licking a button of her father's coat, looked up into his face and returned with unblemished gravity:

"And you are the only father I have."

CHAPTER IV

CONTRARY to his apprehensions, Blundell had the satisfaction of beholding his babe play into his hands regarding her latest aunt, in a way that would have done her credit, or discredit, years later on in her career. Silent as her almost Englishless condition forced her to be—except with Esther, with whom she chattered by the hour, the Yorko-Frankish dialogue apparently giving both of them satisfaction—Cuckoo's habit of planting herself in front of Lady Fabricius and gazing at her in ardent contemplation, was, tactfully interpreted by her father, a custom endearing rather than otherwise to her august relation.

Lady Fabricius never told, and Cuckoo could not tell to anyone but her father, of an awful event that took place one morning at an hour when every one of the household was supposed to be safely out of the way, and the old lady, in a loose dressing-gown, was rolling comfortably towards the bath-room. Most of her hair was on her dressing-table, and her face, as the French so expressively put it, was not yet "made."

Just as she reached the bathroom-door, Cuckoo appeared from downstairs, and Aunt Marcia, who had the previous evening been put into an excellent state of mind about the child by her fascinated gaze, now stooped to conquer.

"Good morning, my love," she said graciously, adding in the French, when all is said and done, of most old English ladies, "*Bong jour*," then, "*Venney ici*, give me

a kiss," and leaning down, she bent her large, flaccid, and alas! early-morning face towards the little maid in the blue overall.

"*Donney-mwaw un baysay,*" she added graciously.

Disaster followed. Cuckoo's odd, quick black eyes gazed at her for one moment distended as if they were about to crack, and then, with a really horrid shriek, the child fled down the kitchen stairs as if the "dowl" were after her. She was so terrified, poor little thing, that she did something almost unknown in their short mutual career; she fled to her father for comfort. In broken, baby French she sobbed that a dreadful old man upstairs had wanted to kiss her, and she knew it was le Père Garou—a local bugbear dear to Anne Rose Ponchaux—le Père Garou, who bit the fingers of bad children and sucked their blood till they died.

"But you were not bad," her embarrassed parent told her, afraid, in view of future revelations on her part, to avow the truth. The child shook her head.

"*Oh, voui,*" she declared in her peasant French, "*elle en est une—elle est sale dosse, sale dosse,*" and she was inconsolable until Esther Oughtenshaw came to the rescue and carried her off to feed the chickens in the paddock behind the kitchen garden. The fact that his child had been called a "*sale gosse*" did not at all afflict Mr. Blundell. Anne Rose, though rough, had been an excellent nurse and a clean, decent body, and what she had called his child was only what she would have called her own if it had lived; but it would be dreadful if Lady Fabricius ever found out the interpretation put by the child she was meant to befriend, on her unadorned matutinal appearance. However, the old lady never referred to the matter again, and when, at lunch-time, she appeared with a slight touch of brown in her make-up (a delicate tribute to the strength of the Wiskedale sun), Cuckoo kissed

her obediently, without recognizing in her aunt the horrible *vieillard* whom she had met outside the bathroom-door.

Lady Fabricius had come, she invariably expressed it, *all that way* on purpose to see Robert Blundell, and after about a week's rest which, to the invalid's huge joy, she declared ought to work wonders for her complexion, she announced at last that a family council must be held regarding the matter about which her advice had been asked.

The council was held that afternoon under the elm-tree, for the wind had changed and the west side of the garden was too warm.

Lady Fabricius, with a demeanor that betrayed her being thoroughly used to serving on committees, installed herself with her back to the trunk of the tree, a table in front of her. She had also seen to it that the chairs of the others faced her across the table. Miss Effie and Miss Flora had been sewing, but their sister bade them lay aside their work to enable them to give their whole mind to the matter in hand. They obeyed her in silence, and then, when their hands were quietly folded in their laps, and Blundell, whose cough was very troublesome that day, had swallowed some soothing draught, Lady Fabricius began.

"I was very sorry to hear three weeks ago that your health was in such an unsatisfactory state, Robert. You doubtless exaggerate the gravity of your condition but——"

"Perhaps," he interrupted, quietly looking towards the west where, under a heavy, hot, blue sky, Laverock lay spread out as if basking in the heat, "but it is a nuisance having a bit of your lung gone so that your heart is uncovered——"

"Robert!" It was Miss Flora who uttered the soft

ejaculation of horror; Miss Effie continued to stare at her brown, bony hands.

"Sorry, Flora, but it is true. I am, in fact, rather vain of being able to go on living with practically no lung left at all. However, Marcia may be right, and it may not matter. Go on, Marcia."

Lady Fabricius, her oily black eyebrows drawn down over her eyes in displeasure at the interruption, went on.

Blundell, as he watched her, knew that he would not forget the picture that she made. From where he sat, propped by his pillows, but still very low, his eldest sister-in-law quite hid the trunk of the fine old elm under which they sat, with the result that it seemed to spring from her broad, gray silk shoulders.

"—And I am sure Sir Adolph would agree with me," the old lady was saying as he arrived at this point in his reflections. He nodded. "I am sure he would," he returned in a voice of noble and disinterested conviction, "go on."

In his own mind, "Poor old devil, he simply has to—and *if* the tree grows out of her shoulders, its roots must be—oh, damn it—I must stop or I shall laugh!"—and he turned his eyes to the sky, of which it struck him there was unusually much in Wiskedale.

"—My son Bertie, of course, is our heir. If my poor daughter Vera had lived, she was to have had five thousand a year for life, but then"—the speaker, whose voice had sunk to a level of melancholy in spite of the noble sum mentioned, assumed a livelier air, as of a brave soul overcoming her grief to do justice to minor matters, "she did not; therefore Bertie, at our deaths, will have it all, except," she added impressively, regarding her sisters, "one or two small—very small—legacies that *I* shall make. Sir Adolph will make no legacies. Sir Adolph has no relatives."

Blundell, bored nearly to tears, fixed his eyes on a narrow ribbon of road up Laverock. Once he had walked there, yes, by Jove! and he had kissed a pretty girl at a farm half-way up! A wave of self-pity nearly submerged him for a moment.

"—And as Sir Adolph said to me, there is no reason why he should provide for your child, Robert."

"Don't bother about my half of her," Robert said, sitting up with a jerk, and breaking into a fit of coughing, "let my half—starve—so long as you save—May's half."

Lady Fabricius regarded him with disfavor. "That," she said shortly, "is a remark I consider in very bad taste, Robert. I have come all this way to settle things with you, and I expect to be treated with respect."

Miss Flora rose, and pouring out a glass of water, gave it to her brother-in-law, who was now fighting for his breath.

"Robert didn't mean any disrespect, dear Marcia, did you, Bob?"

"No, no," he gasped, "of course not. It is only—ah well, go on, Marcia."

Miss Effie regarded him stonily while Miss Flora shook up his pillows, laid him back on them, and put some lavender-water on his handkerchief; and such was the nature of the poor wretch that it even then hurt his vanity to feel that Effie liked him no better than she had done years ago, when she had so bitterly resented his marrying her youngest sister.

"I will go on," Lady Fabricius continued, "if you will allow me to do so. I was saying that I am willing to help poor May's daughter—poor May."

Her abominable old mask of a face quivered for a moment and her eyes, once large and bright, now so lustreless and fat-embedded, gleamed with the scant tears of

old age. "She did not marry you with her eyes shut, but nevertheless I always pitied her."

He bowed.

"You never were a good man, Robert." He gave a little peculiar laugh, his pointed shoulders hunched forward in an attempt at a shrug, and she continued—"I never saw how——"

"Oh, I remember your cleverness in finding out all my sins—and telling them to May. I doubt your wisdom in doing so—no doubt you meant well and you never reflected that I might not have been altogether to blame."

The old lady looked at him doubtfully. "Why were you not to blame?"

A glimmer of amusement came to his eyes.

"Of course we are discussing one particular fault of mine? Well, you remember what Shakespeare said about men like me? I forget the exact text, but it was something about 'his multitudinous heart incarnadine',"——

Miss Effie shook her head. "You are wrong, Robert; that is what he said about the sea."

"What," Miss Flora asked gently, "has Shakespeare, great though he was, to do with Cuckoo?"

They got on better after that, and with much almost unbearable assumption of generosity on Lady Fabricius' part and a certain amount of only half-concealed anger on Blundell's, matters were settled and the council came to an end.

The two Misses Plues were to bring up and educate the young Cuckoo Blundell in consideration of a hundred pounds a year paid to them by Lady Fabricius. Furthermore, when the child was eighteen or nineteen she was, if she proved satisfactory, to be brought out in London society by Lady Fabricius, with a view to finding a husband, and when she was twenty-one the sum of two

hundred pounds a year was to be settled on her for life, irrespective of her marrying or not marrying. One of the father's stipulations was an odd one. Barring conditions of health which might make such a step imperative, Cuckoo was not to leave the dale; she was to be brought up entirely at Roseroofs.

"I want to wear out if I—if *you* can," he declared, "the roving drop which is in her blood. It has been the ruin of me, and I fear she will have it. Restlessness, not money, is the root of all evil."

Lady Fabricius agreed with the sentiment and said so.

"You are wiser than I thought, Robert," she returned. "You were a bad husband, but if you were spared, you might perhaps, after all, be a good father."

He laughed as he rose. "I am tired and will go and lie down if you will excuse me. I am very grateful to you, Marcia. I am very grateful to you all," he added impressively. "As to my badness as a husband, perhaps if you had seen my wife at the end of her life she would have disagreed with you on that point more than you now think possible."

He stood on the edge of the pool of shade in which the three women sat, and in the bright sunshine his skull-like face looked, with its black hollows and lines, like a fire-gutted house. There was a short pause, during which each of the sisters silently told herself that he was dying.

Lady Fabricius went home a few days later, leaving little hope that she would come again before seven more years passed. The journey to London had few horrors for her, but the coming all the way to Wiskedale would, she indicated, hardly bear contemplation. Out of the confused chatter that composed what she believed to be her really delightful conversation, had shone one glimmer of reason. "The child," she said, as she made her adieux

to the child's father, expressing the hope that, in spite of his exaggerated despondency, he soon might be better, "the child had better be told nothing about the money or that she is ever to come to London. It might unsettle her."

And after her departure, the two ladies and Blundell decided to accept this pearl of prudence at its real value, disregarding, as Blundell for his part minutely expressed it, its preposterous source. Cuckoo should not be told.

Having done his best for his poor little daughter in thus securing her a home and a fixed competence, Blundell's strange, shifting mind was at rest. That may have been one reason why he seemed to grow better as July drew on.

The days were quiet days, full of sunshine. Blundell amused himself by reading, by his periodical battles with old Brigworthy, and his unfeigned interest in the country-side news. His memory for names was very remarkable, and as the bits of gossip and items of interest he stowed away in his brain were never forgotten, he often surprised the sisters by the really intimate knowledge he showed of the history of the neighbouring villages and farmers. "He didn't marry a Brigworthy," he would say, "he married a Christie; the other sister married a Cavage from Bellanside," or, "Watlass' girl from the mill is going to marry young Skelton, I tell you; old Skelton's boy whose mother was a Raw," and he was always right. Much of this lore he gathered from Benjie, who was an incorrigible gossip of the worst male type, and a real dyed-in-the-wool male gossip is, as most intelligent people know, far more virulent a specimen than any mere female.

He liked Benjie Brigworthy, who looked older than anyone nowadays could possibly be, and who, though he could make himself perfectly clear if he chose, spoke on

occasion what was Choctaw to Blundell; and presently it transpired that the old rascal was sedulously imparting some of his most incomprehensible words to Cuckoo. The child for some reason or other was enraptured with the bandy-legged, cross-grained old fellow, whose long working in the earth seemed in a way to have caused the earth to take him to herself before his time. He looked, in his ancient brown clothes and his always muddy, leathern gaiters, as if he lived, like potatoes, under the ground, though unlike potatoes, he spent most of his time on the surface.

There was a legend that once, when Benjie was a young thing of forty, the doctor, rash and ill-advised, had, in some minor illness, ordered him a bath. At Benjie's protest the doctor, young and full of the foolishness that comes out of cities, insisted, whereupon Benjie, bowing to the inevitable, took the bath—in his kitchen, by the fire, in a wash-tub—and proved the doctor's folly and his own wisdom by nearly dying of "pewmonia." Three nights did the wretched doctor sit by him and had Benjie died he must have left the dale, but in Benjie's feverish eyes the doctor always declared he read triumph and pleasure, even in the midst of undoubtedly great suffering; he finally made up his mind to relent and live, and the young man from Leeds, now old Dr. Dawes, was nearly as thoroughly associated with the dale as Benjie himself.

Mondays and Fridays were Benjie's days at Roseroofs, and these days Miss Blundell set aside for complete devotion to the object of her admiration. It was never noticeable to her father that Benjie showed any partiality to the child; the boot was entirely on the other leg, and Cuckoo showered favors on the old man. She gave him gooseberry turnovers to which she had herself no legal right; she gave him a long piece of blue satin

ribbon. With fervor she would kiss his earthy hands, and she would sit literally for hours at a time on an upturned flower-pot, watching him as he dawdled about at his work.

"It is a pity, Robert," Miss Effie said once, "that Cuckoo insists on being so much with Benjie Brigworthy. He is an up-dale man and his language is quite un-English."

"She seems to like it."

"That makes it worse." Miss Effie's mouth set tightly, as she spread a tea-cake. "She is beginning to pretend to have forgotten French. She called the ivy on the wall '*hivan*,' this morning, and when I told her 'ivy' or '*lierre*,' which is the French, she flatly refused to use either word."

Blundell laughed. "She will stop when she has had enough," he said. "Why she likes Benjie, the Lord only knows. I don't like having him come 'twixt the wind and my nobility, but apparently she enjoys his savor. She's an odd imp."

There was a pause, during which Benjie was heard to make a long and quite incomprehensible remark, to which the child replied, obviously understanding it all, with a singsong "Aye, Benjie."

Blundell burst out laughing at Miss Effie's frown of disgust, but later, when he was alone with Miss Flora, he reverted to the subject.

"I say, Flora," he began as she threaded her needle with silk and took up her work.

"Yes, Bob."

"Do *you* mind Cuckoo's talking like old Ben?"

"Oh, yes, indeed I do. It is a very ugly dialect, and not at all fitted for a little lady-girl."

"I see. Well, look here, if you really care about it and want her to stop, you must bribe her. I dare not

tell Effie, but that is the truth; if you want her to stop, you must bribe her."

Miss Flora's horror-filled eyes half amused, half touched him.

"Yes, my dear, say you will give her something if she will learn proper English."

"But—that is a very bad precedent to establish, Robert," spoke the ex-governess in Miss Flora.

"I know, but you will find it is the only way. It always was—she is not an ordinary child, Flora, and not an easy one to manage."

"Then so much more must we strive,"——

"Strive as much as you like, but when she has set her mind on anything as it is set on speaking like Benjie, you will find the only way to detach her is to give her something she likes even more than the thing itself."

"It's dreadful, Robert."

"Possibly, but it is true. Shall we prove it?" Miss Flora gazed at him in visible distress, but said nothing.

"Cuckoo," he called in French, "come here a minute." Then he added, "Have you that smelling thing, that carbolic ball in the tartan box with you?"

Miss Flora produced the little oblong box in shining Stuart plaid. It opened by a spring, and a little sponge, dark with age and strongly impregnated with carbolic, bobbed out at the end of a short cord. When Cuckoo appeared, dragging a spade over the flagstones with a hard, grating noise, her eyes at once fell on it and glowed with the lust of possession.

"*Donne,*" she said, holding out an earthy paw.

"*Non, non,*" her father intervened, continuing in French.

Miss Flora could not follow what he said, but at the end of it, the child turned on her and demanded fiercely in Benjie's best accent, "Is yon a lee?"

"Your papa does not tell lies," poor Miss Flora exclaimed, blushing afterwards at the "lee" she herself had told, "of course it is true. What was it, Robert?"

He laughed. "Poor Flora! I told her that if she would learn to speak English nicely and not use old Benjie's language—she did not even know it was supposed to be English—you would give her the carbolic ball."

"*C'est v'ai, c'est v'ai, ma tante?*" the child urged, her eyes glued to the box.

Miss Flora nodded solemnly.

Cuckoo took the little box, pressed the spring, and watched the bounce of the ball with a look of concentration unusual in one so young. Then, her eyes fixed on Miss Flora, she raised the sponge to her nose and sniffed it with ecstasy.

"Oo-ah!" she cried, crumpling her face and expelling her breath in an audible sigh of rapture, "*c'est bon.*"

The promise was then extracted from her to avoid Benjie for a few days and try to learn proper English from her aunts, to the end that she might come into possession of the supreme treasure, as soon as it was seen that she was really learning.

Miss Flora, the child's hand in hers, explained the situation to the gardener, who spat on his palms, thereby producing small bogs in them, and listened grimly.

"You know, Benjie," Miss Flora wound up, "you *can* speak very nicely." His old face did not change; flattery was without effect on Benjie Brigworthy and he happened for no specific reason to dislike Miss Flora, whom, one is regretful to state, he privately called what is equivalent to an "old fool." "She is very little as you know, Benjie," pursued Miss Flora, "and she must learn English and I am sure you will help her by speaking good English with her."

"Aw will not," the old man very unexpectedly re-

turned. "If she cooms, aw'll soon scare her away, making faces at her," and by way of proving the possibility of frightening the renegade in whose coat, so to speak, he had not failed to see the metaphorical ribbon, he made such a hideous grimace that Cuckoo gave a wild yell and fled like a flash into the house.

Miss Flora stood indignant, too nonplussed to say more to the villain of the piece, and went back to her chair, where she found Blundell convulsed with laughter.

"I never knew him," she declared, "to do such a thing before. And in my presence!" she exclaimed.

Meantime Cuckoo, in the kitchen, was partaking of an illicit and solitary meal of stewed gooseberries, bread and butter, and cream, the carbolic ball on the table beside her. This heavy bribe was removed from her by her Aunt Flora a little later and put on the mantelpiece in the drawing-room, where it could be seen but not reached by its admirer; and from that hour Cuckoo Blundell began to learn English.

It was the old vicar, Dr. Loxley, who subsequently discovered the source of the child's love for the old gardener's dialect.

"I understand," the old gentleman said, as they all sat at tea the day after his return from one of his book-hunting expeditions to Edinburgh, "that the nurse who took care of her was a peasant."

"Yes, she came from Vaubin, near Orange; an excellent woman."

"I see. Then, my dear Mr. Blundell, it is clear that the child has in her intercourse with Benjie Brigworthy the equivalent of the nurse's language to which she was accustomed in France."

"But surely, dear Dr. Loxley," Miss Flora put in flutteringly, "Benjie does not speak in the least like a French woman."

"No, Flora, no; oh, no, no! No, not at all; but the French woman spoke a homely dialect that no doubt smacked of the earth, and you cannot deny that Benjie's jargon also smacks of the earth,"—

"Benjie smacks of several things besides the earth," put in Blundell lazily.

The vicar laughed. "Quite so, and even *that* might be a comfort to a homesick child used to living among peasants. It seems to me quite clear that the very roughness and simplicity of Benjie's ugly dialect has been more homelike to the little girl than, let us say, Miss Effie's scholarly French."

Miss Effie's dark face took on an uncomfortable brick-red as she bent over her knitting at this allusion to her linguistic gift. Her belief in her French was one of the dearest possessions of the lonely, oldening woman; an illusion of her lost youth. She had been told in the old days by the Binghams that her then newly-achieved French was excellent—as indeed it was compared with that of the Binghams—and she had believed it then and she believed it still.

It gratified her to have this accomplishment praised by Dr. Loxley, and as the talk went on, Miss Effie's mind went back as it often did to the three years she had spent in Angoulême, where she was La Meess to the children of a rich wine merchant. How polite they had all been! —Adèle, the little Blaise, with his soft cropped hair like a mole's, and Anastasie, only three years old when La Meess arrived. How kind they had all been to her, with their supreme offering of carefully-boiled tea, and their unsuccessfully-veiled relief at the smallness and unobtrusiveness of her teeth!

That rainy afternoon while the Vicar held forth, his tea-cup pushed back so as to make more room on the table for his fat, dimpled, white hands, Miss Effie was

back in Angoulême. How well she remembered it all! How clearly she could see the streets, how distinctly she could hear the voices of the children who were now middle-aged men and women! She recalled one day that, as less acute memories dimmed with time as dims an old mirror, had for some reason, though not itself an important day, kept all the keen edges of its first impression.

It had been a hot, drowsy August day and the streets of the little city were as deserted, as somnolent, as only the streets of southern cities can be. In the Rue St. Gérôme Miss Effie, then a quickly moving Miss Effie with a voluminous green-and-white frock and a soup-plate hat, apparently glued to her head so miraculous was its angle, sat in the cool courtyard of her wine merchant's house, talking to the concierge, Mère Michel—her to whom Blaise and Anastasie to the Meess's bewilderment invariably referred as having lost her cat. Mère Michel with her dark, wrinkled face and her thready old throat was, had La Meess but known it, a kind of awful foreshadowing of what she herself, then so self-confident in the strength of her twenties, was one day to become. As Mère Michel was that day in the sixties, to-day at the end of the eighties was La Meess. But La Meess had not known as she sat in the shade, while Mère Michel in her rush-bottomed chair knitted in the flashing, clicking way of French women. She whose day was just beginning looked pityingly at her whose day was done.

"*Il est très beau,*" La Meess declared, pressing her engraved gold bracelet over the scalloped edge of one of her short, green gloves, a Parisian gift from Madam Duroy, "*je vais prendre une promenade.*"

Mère Michel regarded her for a moment and then dropped her bead-like old eyes on her knitting.

"*Meess fait du progrès,*" she declared, untruthfully but with benevolent intention. So la Meess, very pleased,

went to "*prendre* her *promenade*." How hot it was! The heat was indeed a delicately visible thing, hovering in filmy mists over the baking cobble-stones; all the windows were closed and striped awnings were lowered over the shop fronts. Miss Effie loved the great heat, although M. Duroy himself had condescended to warn her that it was an act of the foolish folly to venture out in the middle of the day. The ladies of France, he assured her, in answer to her funny little Anglo-Frank protest, allowed themeselves at that time two hours' retirement *en déshabille*.

"*C'est l'heure à croquer les bonbons*," the good man added.

La Meess failed to see why the middle hours of the day should be wholly dedicated to bonbons, but she said, as in those days she always did say in return for remarks she did not quite understand, "*Oui, oui, je vois*," and went away.

On that particular day, a day that out of so many forgotten ones had remained in her memory, so clear, so unblurred, she had gone to the Place to change her book at the Library and rested a few minutes in the warm old shop that smelt of books and cheese, for the reason that its neighbor on one side was a cheesemonger's. Then she went to the Horloger's for Madam Duroy's watch, which had undergone a minor operation there, and after posting her home letter La Meess stopped at Chaquard's, and sitting at a little marble table under the striped awning, partook of a pineapple-ice. This was her passion, pineapple-ices served as only Chaquard served them, in little colored glass cups.

Miss Effie was the only customer at that unusual time of day and sat very stiff, very shy in the wilderness of little green iron chairs and marble-topped tables, wishing the two sleepy-looking waiters would not stare so.

Poor Antoine, poor Hégésippe! Of course they stared, drowsy and warm as they were, at the singular Miss who partook of ices at such an unheard-of hour.

That was in Miss Effie's first summer at Angoulême. She stayed on for three years and she learned French in a way, for she set herself to learn it and her diligence was, of course, rewarded. (The invariability of its reward is indeed the only excuse for diligence, a very lazy man once said to her, a remark of which she quite properly disapproved.)

And during her three years in the pleasant, characteristic old city, some delightful, a few painful, and one very wonderful thing happened to her; this last actually a proposal of marriage from Mr. Duroy's partner. But when, as now, she could sit, her silence covered by the chatter of other people, and undisturbed and unobserved go back across the plain of her uneventful years, it was that August day when she had eaten a pineapple-ice all alone among the tables at Chaquard's, which seemed to incorporate her experience in France.

Sometimes it had rained in Angoulême, and then all the windows were shut and no one went out. A noisy summer rain was pelting against the window of the dining-room as Miss Effie reached this point of her little excursion into the past, and through the west window near which she sat, came the sound of the great ash tossing its boughs in the wind.

"So he is coming home to-morrow." The Vicar was filling his pipe as La Meess melted away and Miss Effie looked up.

"Who is coming, Vicar?" she asked with great briskness; "the tree is so noisy, I did not quite hear."

"George." The old man smiled at her as he struck a match. "Of course he ought to have stayed on till the

first, but after all, one can get measles twice,"——

"Of course one can." Miss Effie rose, putting her knitting into her work-bag. "Well, I'm glad he is coming; I like George and I do not believe he is any too strong. Why you sent him south I never could see, you know, Vicar, when there were such good schools at home. The poor child must miss the Air." Miss Effie always spoke as if there was no air of any kind south of Leeds.

Blundell, who was lying on the brown leather sofa between the two south windows, spoke, sitting up slowly.

"How old did you say your grandson was, Dr. Loxley?" he asked hoarsely, clearing his throat, which had been bad all day.

"He is nearly nine, but he doesn't look more than seven; he has always been delicate. But you must hear him sing—you must hear him sing. It is like—well——" the old man broke off, "*isn't* it, Flora?"

"I don't want to hear him sing," Blundell interrupted. "I can't stand boys' voices, they always make me cry."

Miss Flora looked at him.

"Oh, Bob!"

"It does—the little brutes make one feel such, such—well, unfit to hear them, you know."

He laughed again but his poor voice, bracketed by the two laughs, was not quite steady and the old clergyman, who in his heart had always disliked him, spoke up at once.

"I know what you mean, Blundell,"——

Robert Blundell in his turn knew what the old Vicar meant by thus, for the first time, dropping the "Mister."

CHAPTER V

GEORGE LOXLEY turned out to be, to Blundell's unexpressed satisfaction, a charming child, with the rather old-fashioned manners that endear children to people who fundamentally do not like them. George was possessed of none of the restlessness which makes sitting still an impossibility to most small boys, nor was he beset by a thirst for stories. For some reason he liked sitting in the shade with the sick man but he talked little, and allowed Blundell, who was possessed of an insatiable curiosity, to ask all the questions; it is pathetic to think that the dying man of the world, tended and cared for by the two sisters in a way that no one knew better than himself he did not deserve, actually longed for the male child to come and sit by him, for the reason that, although only nine, George was at least not a kind and unselfish old woman.

His own ingratitude was patent to Blundell, but he could not help being bored by Miss Effie and Miss Flora, unobtrusive as they were, and often he even pretended to be asleep when first one and then the other would come quietly across the grass to take a look at him. Their relief when his closed eyes and regular breathing had deceived them, was quite visible to him through his lashes, as they returned to the house, though he felt no resentment at knowing that they regarded this as a duty and not a pleasure.

When he chose to chain them for an hour or so to his chariot-wheels, he could do it, he knew, by simply allowing his indescribable but irresistible charm to work. He

had only to open the door of the cage and even Miss Effie visibly softened towards him, whereas Miss Flora, when Miss Effie was not by, would become less wraith-like, less like a faded old goddess, and more like a flesh and blood woman than at other times. The bird, he knew, could sing her mind into subjection, but he always whistled it back to its cage very soon. Its voice tired him nowadays, and its tricks brought him no happiness even for the moment, and as time went on the dear things bored him more and more, and no one knew how strongly the old lover of women, the heart-eater of a few years before, longed for the society of men. Almost any man on earth could he have welcomed with enthusiasm, during those quiet last days of his life.

Miss Effie and Miss Flora, into whose peaceful home he had for a second time intruded, never dreamt of what he wanted. They very naturally did not know that men of his type always, when not directly engaged in the pleasures of the chase, do want the society of men. What is called a woman-lover has little use for the company of plain, old, or impregnably virtuous women, however intelligent and delightful to other men these women may be; and Blundell lay in his chair a little less alive, a little more dead, every twenty-four hours, waiting for the Vicar, the old bookworm who disliked him, and the nine-year-old George, whose one value to the invalid was that he was not a female child.

The Vicar, kind man, vaguely felt that for some reason poor Blundell enjoyed his reluctant visits, and nearly every day he would leave his beloved study and cross the stepping-stones and trot up the winding path from Widdybank to sit for an hour with his friends' guest. Ironically, it pleased Blundell to read the old man's mind, and to know at what a sacrifice of his own comfort he was there. From the moment that the well-pressed black hat

appeared over the wall to the westward, to that when the whole Vicar became visible beyond the gate, Blundell felt a wicked, amused sense of power.

"He doesn't want to come, poor old beggar," he would reflect, and at the back of his mind there lay the unconscious feeling "they have always done it, all of them, and they do it even now."

But he was not all malice, any more than anyone is all anything, and very soon he would find himself half innocently opening the door of his cage, and half unconsciously using his charm. Sometimes he would talk of books, of which he knew little, but in this pleasant field of conversation the old man could almost roll like a horse turned out to grass.

One evening, when August was at its beginning, Blundell, really touched by his old visitor's look of fatigue, opened his cage and deliberately let the bird out. The old man had toiled up the hill in the heat and he must be rewarded, but the bird, poor creature, was not the bird of its prime: its once lustrous plumage had thinned and dulled; its wing-power was nearly gone; its whistle was feeble and hoarse. However, it could still hop about and deploy its graces, and the Vicar fell to it at once. Quite suddenly he felt that after all he must have been too hard on the poor fellow, and all his life the minute Robert Blundell arrived at being called "the poor fellow" by a disapprover, the disapprover's doom, as such, was sealed.

The old man never could remember what it was that the poor fellow said on that occasion, but henceforth he really liked him, and when the not distant day came that he stood at his grave, reading the burial service over him, tears rolled down the old man's cheeks, sincere tears.

This, however, is not yet. It was a fine afternoon and their shade-pursuing course had led them to the jut of

the house on the east side, just outside the low, white paling of the kitchen garden.

The garden was full of golden and red flowers now, and even the highest fields on the hill, those just under the naked moors, were shorn of their hay and only pale stretches of yellow showed where it had been. On the green outside the garden gate, George and Cuckoo were playing at some quiet game such as the boy loved.

Blundell could see their two heads, George's small and mouse-colored, Cuckoo's black and rough, as they moved in their play.

"George loves Cuckoo," the Vicar said presently, bent, in the fervor of his "poor fellow" mood, on making Blundell happy.

"Yes, I suppose he will fall in love with her later."

"Good gracious! my dear Blundell, why should he?"

"Why shouldn't he?—unless he is not here when she is the right age." After a moment the father, who gleaned much amused satisfaction from his observations of the bird as it so mildly devastated the garden of the Vicar's dislike of him, laughed gently.

"I suppose even you men of God know that at a certain age young men must fall in love with somebody," and every word of this speech seemed full of charm, even now was the bird's power so great.

The Vicar nodded. "Of course, of course," he murmured, "nature you know, nature,"——

"Exactly, well, that is what I mean. If George is here when Cuckoo is say, seventeen, and he has not fallen in love with some woman of thirty before then, she will try her young spurs on him and," he added, sitting up suddenly and breaking into a fit of coughing, "she will —slash him!"

There was a little pause until the coughing fit was over, and then, the sun having found them out—the sun seemed,

Blundell complained, to pursue him with a kind of malignance—the Vicar called Esther Oughtenshaw, and the little caravan moved to the next oasis; back to the south, outside the dining-room window where the elm's thick shade still lay unblemished on the grass.

They were still sitting here, the Vicar telling his new friend all about the last book sale he had attended and at which he had spent far too much money, Blundell listening half asleep. The sound of the children's voices reached him now and then, or a few bars of a hymn from Esther in the kitchen.

A bird was singing below in the dale; Blundell wondered if it was a lark; he wondered if the nightingale still sang in the trees of the little house at Avignon; he wondered why peacocks had such horrible voices—he was asleep.

When Miss Flora came springing round the corner, wringing her hands with excitement, her eyes luminous with what appeared to be a mixture of anguish and joy, he woke with a start.

"Oh, Robert! oh, dear Vicar! do come into the drawing-room! He is at the foot of the steep bit already, and will be here in a moment—and we have not a drop of wine except your port, Robert! Esther is washing, and there is only cold mutton for supper,"——

Blundell rubbed his eyes and stared at her in despair. He had never seen her so excited before, but it was evident that Doctor Loxley was less unused to such manifestations.

"My dear Flora," the old gentleman said firmly, rising and looking at her through the gold-rimmed glasses without which he would have looked, to the village in general, as unsuitable for public view as he would have looked in his nightshirt, "my dear Flora, *who* is coming?"

Miss Flora stopped short in her hand-wringing and

fluttering, and answered quietly, "Sir Peregrine Janeways."

Blundell stared. "Janeways! Nonsense. Flora, what on earth should Pelly Janeways be doing in this God-forsaken—I mean to say,"——

But Miss Flora had not even heard him. She was explaining to the Vicar that they must make haste if they were to be politely seated in the drawing-room in time.

Dr. Loxley straightened his tie and drew his fat hand over his bald head.

"But we do not want to be in the drawing-room," he explained; "if Sir Peregrine wishes to see you ladies, you can see him there, of course. If he has come to see—in part—Blundell—he will come out here where Blundell is. What," he added oratorically, waving his hand in a way that would have adorned any pulpit, "could be nicer?"

Miss Flora, who was in her shabbiest frock, glided away with incredible speed, and the Vicar called out to Esther to bring more chairs. Then he sat down.

"I didn't know Sir Peregrine Janeways was at home," he observed calmly.

"At home?" A dark flush had come into Blundell's hollow cheeks, and was spreading up over his cheek bones. "What do you mean by at home?"

The irritability of extreme nervousness jarred in his voice; it infuriated him, this talk of which he could make nothing.

"His home—the Janeways' place is only twelve miles from here," the Vicar explained mildly. "Didn't you know? And do you know Janeways?"

"I have known Sir Peregrine Janeways for years," Blundell answered excitedly, "although he is a good bit older than I am. My dear Vicar, we have heard the

chimes at midnight together many a time in Paris and Italy! *Do* I know the Magnificent!"

After a movement, he went on. "I wish I'd known he was near—I'd have had some one to talk to." The bird was indeed back in his cage.

The Vicar, however, did not mind, and a moment later a horse was heard off to their right, coming up the road from the dale.

Miss Effie and Miss Flora, without a word on the subject of dress, had with an almost miraculous rapidity changed into garments worthy of the occasion and were sitting in stately silence in the drawing-room when their caller was announced by Esther Oughtenshaw.

"Ah, Miss Effie—Miss Flora—I am only just back, and thought I could do not better this fine day than ride over and look up my old friends"——

Beautifully attired in riding clothes of exactly the right degree of shabbiness, healthy, sunburnt, white-teethed, jovial, Sir Peregrine Janeways came into the old room like a fine high wind. The ladies shook hands with their neighbor and established him in a chair which the next minute he had left, going to stand with his rather short legs far apart, his huge shoulders completely blocking out the ornaments on the mantelpiece.

He had just come from Deauville—whither he was returning very shortly—to attend to some business about which Dewhurst, his steward, had been tormenting the life out of him for months. Nothing but the dust of the grave, he told them, could ever stop Dewhurst's mouth.

He had heard that Bob Blundell was staying at Roseroofs, so he thought he might see him as well—Bob was an old friend of his.

"Is it true that he is seedy, Miss Effie?"

Miss Effie bowed stiffly, and it was Miss Flora who gave the sad details.

Sir Peregrine was visibly shocked. "Dear me, dear me," he kept murmuring, "poor fellow! dear me—is he really—upon my soul I never knew a word of it all! Dewhurst told me"——

Then he asked about the health of the ladies and told them that they both looked delightful, and that though he did not often come to Roseroofs, he never forgot the dear old house and the happy hours he had passed there in his youth. . . .

Presently Miss Effie suggested that they should sojourn to the garden.

"Garden?"

"Robert is there, under a tree,"——

"Oh, is he, that's good—oh, well, if he is in the garden he cannot be so ill as you fear, Miss Effie. Ladies are always so easily alarmed," he said with his odd little regency air that fitted so well with his grizzled hair and his unconscious, graceful bows. "Ladies are always nervous."

But when he had followed her through the window and down the path to where the chairs stood, his musical, cheerful voice faltered. Miss Flora, who had gone to the blue-room where Cuckoo slept, over the dining-room, and who stood at the window, saw the swift change that came over his face as he took off his hat to the Vicar and approached the two men.

Miss Flora watched the little scene for a moment and then withdrew from the window.

After a while Esther Oughtenshaw knocked at the door and on being told to come in, did so.

"Miss Flossie, dear," she said, straightening a picture on the wall, "they want you."

"They want me?"

Miss Flora, who was busily soaping her hands, plunged them into the water and then shook the wet from them before reaching for a towel.

"Aye, Miss Effie sent me. Sir Peregrine is going to stay for dinner."

Miss Flora laughed. "Ah, that will be delightful, Esther—such a very old friend as Sir Peregrine—but why did you call me Miss Flossie?"

Esther Oughtenshaw turned to the door. "Aw doant kna-aw, Miss Flora," she answered, "it just ca-ame to me; perhaps it was seeing Sir Peregrine again. In t'old days, when he used to come, the mistress was still here, calling you Flossie,"——

Miss Flora laughed softly. "Yes, she always did, dear mother. She liked Sir Peregrine too. Do you remember the books he used to bring Effie to read, French books?"

"Oh, aye, ah mind, but coom along down, Miss Flora," the old servant reminded her. "They're waiting an' all,"——

It was only half-past six, and for a long time the little party sat under the big tree. The wind had changed, and the sun was going soberly down the sky, like an old lady wrapping herself in a soft, gray, Shetland shawl. The talk, animated at first, grew quieter little by little.

And presently the Vicar made his adieux, and then Miss Effie, bound to her duty by her knowledge of French, rose without a word and went to retrieve the sure-to-be-errant Cuckoo and put her to bed. The remaining three sat in silence for a while, Peregrine Janeways' splendid dark eyes full of pity as they rested on the invalid, a new look of discontent and something like fright on Blundell's face.

It was clear that Blundell was thinking that it was one thing to die in the presence of two pathetic, kind, old women, who would before long themselves be doing the same thing, but quite another to be dying under

the pitying gaze of Peregrine Janeways, a man some five or six years older than himself, but still in all the splendor of his health and the full enjoyment of every moment of his life.

"Rotten luck, isn't it?" he broke out irrepressibly once, as their eyes met, and Janeways made no pretense of not understanding.

"Damnable!" he answered tersely, forgetting Miss Flora, who had drawn her chair a little to one side and who was gazing at the place where the sunset was going on in magnificent privacy.

"I—can't you—no doubt you have tried everything, seen everybody?"

Blundell nodded fiercely. "My dear fellow, I have practically no lung left at all. They sent me back here from Switzerland, and you know what that means."

Janeways bit his lip: "I can't tell you how sorry I am."

There was no answer to this, and a moment's silence fell, broken by the older man's bursting out, "But tell me, Bob, my dear fellow, how did you ever happen to come here? Dewhurst—my agent, you know—told me, but I could hardly believe it was you. What have you to do with this part of the world?"

Blundell forced his pale lips to smile, but it was Miss Flora, guiltily conscious of her own social defects, who said, bursting into the conversation and turning her little back to the west with great resolution:

"Of *course* dear Robert came here, Peregrine! You see, his wife was our sister."

Janeways' dark face, full of surprise, gazed at her.

"His wife! I never knew you were married, Blundell!" —and then at the look in Miss Flora's eyes, he wished with fervor that he had never been born. "I knew, of course, that May had married, but I never dreamt that you were her husband!"

Blundell broke into a hoarse laugh of sheer amusement.

"No, I daresay you didn't. We went to Italy first and then, in Paris—my wife was very quiet and did not like going out; besides," he murmured maliciously, "I was not likely to introduce *you* to my domestic circle, you old reprobate! The wonder is that any man ever tells *you* he is married,"——

Miss Flora rose, her delicate face of that white which in some people shows extreme agitation. "Robert!" she cried, almost in a whisper.

Janeways had risen too, and he too was white, as if the pallor of poor Miss Flora's face were reflected in his.

"Don't be an ass, Blundell," he said shortly, adding in an amusingly different voice, "He is trying to frighten you, Flora."

But she had seen that he was angry, and his anger quieted and soothed hers.

"He is a great tease," she said with a flutter in her voice, "but I understand him. Yes, he married our dear sister May. She was much younger," she added with dignity, "than Effie and me; she died four years ago; so—of course—Robert came to us. We are greatly enjoying his visit." And after this masterpiece of social diplomacy she glided away in her most Miss Flora-like manner, into the house.

The two men looked at each other and presently Janeways spoke.

"You are a swine, Blundell," he said, "to hurt her—I am a villain if you like—but I would die rather than hurt that poor soul. You are a brute!"

Blundell coughed. "I am sorry, truly sorry, Pelly—she is a little old faded angel, like a little old faded fresco, and—I am sorry." Then he added maliciously, closing his eyes, "How's Mrs. Browning?"

The other man's dark face did not change. "Very well, thanks," he said.

Then Esther Oughtenshaw rang the gong—the gong had came from Burmah a hundred years ago—and he was obliged to help Blundell out of his chair and give him his arm to the house.

Blundell leaned on him heavily, but said with the blank lack of gratitude that sometimes characterized him, "Your sympathy with Flora is so striking, it occurs to me that Mrs. Browning's mother and sisters possibly do not come under the category of 'poor souls?' "

He was a little taller than Janeways, but he was so obviously dying, his every weakness was so apparent, that Janeways looked far the bigger as well as, in spite of his gray hair, the younger man, and it struck Janeways himself, angry though he was, that the fellow undoubtedly had courage to dare to speak to him in this way.

"I wish you were well, Bob," he said, almost lifting the sick man up the step into the drawing-room. "If you were, I should pretty nearly have killed you for that."

"Yes, you would—it would be just like you. 'Is it possible he can know what he is,' " Blundell quoted softly, " 'and yet *be* what he is?' Just raise your arm a little," he added, in an undisturbed voice, "and then I can lean on you better."

Two hours later, as Sir Peregrine Janeways left Roseroofs, he stumbled, on issuing from the gate on to the green where Esther Oughtenshaw had tethered his horse, over a bundle lying on the grass.

Miss Effie, who, in default of a host, had accompanied her guest thus far on his way, gave a little scream.

"Cuckoo!" she cried sharply, "you naughty child, what are you doing there in your nightgown?"

Cuckoo had come, it appeared, to see the horse; Esther had told her about the horse, and of course she was in her nightgown, considering that she had come straight from her bed.

The child's logical explanation of her appearance amused and pleased Janeways. He set her on his horse and led the animal up and down for a few minutes.

"Like it?" he asked as he at last put her back into Miss Effie's arms.

She nodded, "Aye."

After a moment she added in French, "Will you give it to me? I want it."

"For shame, Cuckoo!"

Poor Miss Effie was really distressed, but Janeways explained to the child that while he could not give her Black-eyed Susan, as he needed that lady as a means to get him home, yet he might one day, if she was a good girl, give her a pony.

"*Parole d'honneur?*" she asked.

"*Parole d'honneur.*"

He said good-bye to Miss Effie, shook hands quite as gravely with the child, and rode off.

At the corner of the wall where the road turned down towards the dale, he pulled up and called out in French, "By the way, my little cabbage, what's your name?" and shrilly came back the answer:

"Cuckoo B'undell!"

As Black-eyed Susan, with the delicacy of Agag, felt her way down the dark road, Janeways spoke aloud to himself.

"So that's it," he said, adding with a little chuckle, "Well, I'm damned!"

CHAPTER VI

WIDDYBANK village and the church lay about three miles up dale from Warcop. The church was a small one, very ancient, with incontrovertible signs of having been built while men who had seen the Conqueror were still living, although the greater part of it had been reconstructed towards the end of the thirteenth century. The font bore the date of 1592, and on the old gravestones in the nave were dates as far back as 1390. The churchyard, too, was so closely packed with what Cuckoo, aged ten, once called "eternal resters," that fifty years before her birth the so-called new churchyard had to be enclosed and consecrated, and was now the one in general use.

It was, however, in the old churchyard that the Reverend Arthur Rose Loxley stood one day in March, nearly three years after the arrival at Roseroofs of Robert Blundell and his daughter, reading the service for the burial of the dead over the man whose friend he so unexpectedly had become.

Blundell, after a series of ups and downs, some of the ups so vigorous as to seem almost miraculous, some of the downs so deep as to have made everyone who saw them convinced that there could be no subsequent mount, had finally died very suddenly three days before.

The Vicar had been at Roseroofs in the afternoon and in the evening George had come home white-lipped, to tell his grandfather that Mr. Blundell was dead, and the

two had climbed the path together, hand in hand, to see the ladies.

Miss Effie they had found very calm, though worn and weary, but Miss Flora's nerves had given way and she was crying bitterly.

When she could do so without being conspicuous, Miss Effie drew the old Vicar into the study, a room that the coming of his first winter there had naturally dedicated to poor Blundell, and here among the dead man's personal belongings—his silver cigarette-box, his case full of books, his photographs, his walking-sticks and his long-unused pipes—Miss Effie button-holed her friend, who was mourning what he called Miss Flora's lack of self-control, and told him a little ancient history.

"You mustn't blame Flora," Miss Effie said fiercely, her hot, dry eyes gazing at him in the gloom, "she can't help it."

"I know that, my dear Effie, but she will make herself ill with crying. Her hands are like ice and she is weak with tears."

"Let her be," declared Miss Effie with an odd break in her voice and almost, the old man thought, with sacramental solemnity. "Vicar, you are older than we. You could have christened us if you had been here ten years sooner, you knew our father and mother——"

A dry sobbing broke the flow of her words, and the kind old man took her hot hands and held them gently.

"Of course, my dear, I am the oldest and I hope the closest friend you have in the world. Tell me what it is that is so troubling you."

Of all the habits on earth, the habit of inborn, cultivated, Northern reserve is the hardest to break, and the Vicar knew how Miss Effie's struggle was hurting her.

"Tell me, my dear, tell me," he kept repeating, as they

stood by the window in the dim evening light of the raw Spring day.

And finally, while the sound of Miss Flora's unrestrained grief reached them for a moment as someone, probably Esther Oughtenshaw, opened the drawing-room door, Miss Effie spoke.

"The trouble was," she said, her strong bony hands hurting the Vicar's soft, fat ones as she squeezed them, "that although poor Robert married May—poor May—Flora always cared for him, and now she is, of course, heart-broken."

The Vicar had never dreamed of such a thing and said so.

"Are you sure, my dear?" he asked, and Miss Effie answered that she was sure.

"I have always known, Vicar, though she thinks I do not, and though she cries so dreadfully now, she won't allow me to say a word to her; oh, if you could have seen her last night—he was dying all last night. Oh, Dr. Loxley! why," the tortured woman cried, breaking off, "must it take people so long to die? First Father—a fortnight of death agony he had—then Mother; you remember how she used to sit up in bed and try to breathe, and tried to make us think that it didn't hurt? and now poor Bob! It was frightful—he was whiter than the pillows—all but his poor, damp hair; and his hands—his hands were wet all night. He kept drying them on the sheet, but they were always wet. And Flora, poor, poor Flora—she kept going out of the room; over and over again she would creep out—you know how soft-footed she is—well, she was as silent as a ghost, and kept going out, and then I would find her crying and bring her back."

"I know, I know, but that, dear Effie was *last* night," the old man returned; "this, by God's goodness, is another night; a new one. Look!"

Through the lustrous dimness of the dove-colored sky came a pale, flickering light, and there, hooked as it seemed to the edge of a cloud, hung the little, bright, new moon.

Miss Effie grasped the old man's lesson in silence, and for a moment they stood side by side, looking up.

"And why have you told me," he said presently, "about our poor Flora?"

Miss Effie drew back. "Because," she answered, in a low, strained voice, "I cannot bear it any longer—I cannot bear seeing her cry like that, and I thought perhaps you might be able to say something, something to comfort her——"

"Shall I go to her now?" the Vicar asked simply, for they both belonged to an age when death or sorrow of any kind naturally expected comfort from a clergyman.

Miss Effie nodded. "Yes," she said at last, "try to comfort her; but oh, Vicar, never tell her I told you."

He patted her poor, hot hands.

"Of course not, of course not, Miss Effie, and you were right to tell me, for my knowing may help me to console her," he answered, with the fine simplicity of his school.

He was about to leave the room when she called him back.

"Oh, Vicar, he wants—wanted—Robert, I mean—to have George sing at his grave."

The old man stared, the door in his hand. "Sing—at his grave? That's a very odd idea."

"I know, but you know how he has loved George's singing, ever since that first Christmas Eve—and only yesterday he sent for him to sing outside his door—(he would not let him come in lest his looks might alarm the child) and George sang, 'Hark, hark, my soul'—oh, Vicar! it was——," the poor lady's composure gave way and she hid her face in her hands.

When she looked up she was alone in the room; the Vicar was gone. He could face Miss Flora's tears but not Miss Effie's. He stayed an hour with Miss Flora in the pale drawing-room where the snowdrops still drooped that he himself had brought Blundell only two days before. They were faded now, but no one had remembered to throw them away. Miss Flora no longer cried; she was tired out, and presently she tried to eat a little supper, brought to her by Esther Oughtenshaw.

To the Vicar's sorrow and mild resentment his kind platitudes on the subjects of death and resurrection were met with polite lack of enthusiasm by the poor lady hanging limply over the tray.

"It is very good of you—very kind," she kept saying, but that was all, and he resumed: "It is, after all, sad as it is, only to be expected for a man with so little lung left——"

To his dismay Miss Flora gave a little, high laugh at this.

"I know—of course we all knew," she answered, "but —oh, well, Vicar, I cannot explain, but I had a very special reason for crying in that horrible way. It wasn't only that I couldn't help it; I had a real reason——"

"Perhaps I know your reason, my dear Flora," he began, but stopped at the look in her face. There was there horror, and shame, and a kind of fear.

"No, oh, no," she cried, setting her tea cup down with a little crash that sent part of its contents slopping into the saucer, "you cannot know—no one knows," she added, sitting bolt upright and speaking with an earnest fierceness that almost alarmed the old man. "No one *shall* know."

And then quite suddenly, with a complete change of tone, as if she regretted her vehemence and wished to destroy his memory of it, she asked him quietly if George might sing at Blundell's burial.

"I don't—don't know," he replied slowly; "it is a thing I have never seen done, and it will look very odd. Besides, the boy is so delicate, so nervous, I prefer to avoid exciting things for him——"

But Miss Flora to his surprise insisted; gently yet authoritatively she insisted, and finally he gave in, on the condition that the boy himself was not afraid of doing it.

"I will ask him," he suggested, rising, but it was Miss Flora who went into the garden and found George sitting on the low wall watching the moon, and asked him.

Miss Effie, from her room, which was over the study, watched them talking, and the Vicar saw them from the drawing-room; little George's pointed chin and long nose outlined against the growing light of the moon, Miss Flora, her damp handkerchief still being dabbed occasionally to her eyes, standing by him. At last Miss Flora stooped in her irresolute, fluttering way, and kissing George's cheek hastily, walked back to the house, while the twelve-year-old boy, apparently neither insulted nor embarrassed by the kiss, again clasped his thin knees with his arms and went on looking at the sky.

And now the last words of the service were said. The Vicar wiped his eyes, and the small group of people round the open grave drew back a little and waited. There was Esther Oughtenshaw, holding the eight-year-old Cuckoo —a crow-hued Cuckoo it was—by the hand, old Benjie Brigworthy in his best clothes, Dr. Hawes, Henry Pike, the sexton, and Sir Peregrine Janeways, who had come quite unexpectedly, having just heard of the death, and stopped over a train in order to pay this last compliment to his old crony.

The Vicar watched the heavily-built figure as it stood

back in the shade of the church and was gratified, in an impersonal way, for Roseroofs.

Presently Janeways, after a little pause, crossed the spongy grass and came to the grave.

"Will you kindly tell the ladies that I came," he said, in the undertone proper to the presence of those whom no noise can disturb, "and give them my kindest regards? I must be off or I shall miss my train at Middleton."

And he did miss his train at Middleton for, as he spoke, little George Loxley, in his ill-fitting surplice, opened his mouth and began to sing.

It was poor Blundell's best-loved hymn, "Hark, hark, my soul," and after a start that amazed himself, Janeways stood listening, as motionless as if his tan-colored raincoat had been cut out of stone and he himself one of the long-dead Herberts of Wiske in the old church. Never as long as he lived was he to forget the scene.

His nerves were more keenly edged than usual, that day, for his appearance there in the consecrated place was, as he put it to himself, sandwiched between two very different engagements. He was in his usual position of being not quite off with an old love before he was satisfactorily on with a new, and the past morning had held for him an unpleasantly painful interview, while the coming evening was, he knew, to hold for him an interview as poignant, as dramatic, though far less unpleasant.

Also, in spite of the life he lived, the man had a sense of the beautiful that was a little too keen for him to have heard, in this quiet place, the words of the burial service with a perfectly easy conscience.

"Poor old Bob," he had told himself, and with perfect truth, while the Vicar read the beautiful words, "would not have minded. He was just as bad—oh, yes, quite as

bad as I am." And yet he himself *had* minded. He had almost wished he had not come.

And now, as if rooted to the wet grass by the sound of the boy's voice, poor Pelly Janeways minded more and more every minute. Exactly in front of him in the shade of the ancient, ivy-covered church stood little George Loxley, his mouse-colored head thrown back, his red mouth as wide open as if he had been a hungry young bird, his pointed chin quivering as he sang.

To the left stood the little group of mourners, and off Janeways' right, outside the double row of fine ash-trees that grew round the churchyard, was the Vicarage, its little windows hung with freshly-washed muslin curtains. The Vicarage stood a few feet higher than the church, so that the drawing-room windows were visible behind the leafless lilac and laburnums in the garden, and at the drawing-room windows he saw two white blurs which he knew must be the faces of Miss Effie and Miss Flora.

"Hark, hark, my soul, angelic songs are swelling
O'er earth's green fields and ocean's wave-beat shore,"

sang the boy. His was one of the exquisite, soul-shaking boy sopranos that so rarely develop into good men's voices. It had a quality that cannot possibly be described but that fortunately most people know, the quality called bird-like, though no bird's voice ever made people cry, whereas this particular boy's voice draws tears as innocently and inevitably as sunshine draws scent from roses.

Possibly, too, George Loxley's physical delicacy lent an added element of pathos to his voice, for he was twelve, and at twelve most boys' voices have lost what for want of a better name one calls the angelic quality. He was a simple, fragile child, no more nervous at doing this unusual thing than if he had been six and, as he sang, un-

accompanied, his voice grew in sweetness and poignancy until he was almost unbearable. He had pitched it a tone too high as well, and at the last, when he reached the words, "Singing to welcome," the little quiver by which he reached by innocent straining the high note was like a knife in the heart of at least one of his hearers. Janeways, always a shamelessly emotional man, wiped his eyes without reserve, and glancing at the Vicarage saw that two windows were now open and that a lady sat in each. One of the sisters had gone upstairs, either the better to see or to be alone.

As the last note of the hymn died away, Janeways turned to the Vicar. "I never," he said simply, "heard anything like that."

The old man nodded. "Yes, I cannot bear it sometimes myself. Will you drink a glass of wine with me before you go? The ladies are there——"

Everyone had gone now, except old Pike and Esther Oughtenshaw and the child, who were walking slowly towards the Vicarage.

Janeways shook his head. "No, thanks, I have missed my train and shall have to get on the best way I can to York. I have—an engagement——"

The two men shook hands, and Janeways had gone half-way down the damp, flagged path to the front of the church where his horse stood, when something small and black attacked him flank-wise and Cuckoo looked up at him in triumph.

"It is, Esther," she cried. "It is, aren't you?" she insisted, clutching his hand.

"That depends on what you said I was."

"Oh, sir, please excuse her," Esther Oughtenshaw broke in. "It is only some nonsense about a horse. I told her it was unseemly talk in a churchyard, but there's nowt to be done with her."

Cuckoo did not seem to have grown much in the three years since he had seen her—he had been out of England most of the time—but she was strikingly like her father, with the jut of her little jaw and the curve of her little nose.

"Come along, Cuckoo," the old servant urged, dragging at her charge's arm. Cuckoo turned on her fiercely.

"Go away, Esther Oughtenshaw, this is my father's friend; aren't you?" she added, taking Janeways' hand.

"Yes, yes, of course I was," he agreed, although he had in truth never regarded poor Blundell as more than an excellent occasional boon companion, "but you must go to your aunts now."

He was puzzled and a little shocked at the child's manner, and he wondered vaguely at what age children do begin to realize death, or to mourn their parents. Perhaps something of this showed in his face, for Esther said hurriedly, "She's tired out, poor bairn—she has cried out all her tears——"

But however that might be, Cuckoo had no tears now and no intention of pretending. Her curious little sloe-like eyes gazed earnestly, avidly, up at the man her father had known, and with a gesture of amusing hauteur to the old servant, she said to Janeways:

"Where's the pony?"

It is odd that he should have been horrified at this question, but he was, and his rebuke was so serious that a moment later he had given her a sovereign to console her for what he had said.

She took the sovereign but added, "You said you would, you know you did."

"Yes, yes, and so I will some day, if you are a good girl. Now, good-bye——" He stooped to kiss her, but the little creature drew back.

"When you have kept your word," she returned, and he

knew that she was repeating a phrase of her Aunt Effie's, "I will kiss you," and he went his way, leaving her in the churchyard, firm in her integrity of purpose.

And for the second time on leaving her, Janeways said, "Well, I'm damned!"

CHAPTER VII

GEORGE LOXLEY was, after all, educated at home. His delicacy, though not of the kind from which any particular disease is expected to develop, was yet great enough to induce the school doctor in the south to advise his grandfather to remove him from school and keep him at home, where he could have not only his fine native air, but the greatest individual care —care such as can be given a child only by his own people.

The old man and his still older housekeeper, Mrs. Bridlegoose, were wise in their unremitting oversight; and the little wisp of a boy who had looked so very small and so very light on his return was hardly to be recognized after two or three months at the Vicarage, in the more solid, comparatively rosy child he had become.

Educationally, the Vicar was less of a success. His intentions were of course of the best, and at first he devoted several hours a day to instructing his grandson but, as things turned out, it was just as well that the boy's four years under the wise guidance of Mr. Porter, as well as his own natural love of study, had in an unusual degree prepared him for self-education.

The Vicar was a hopeless, ever-sighing book-lover; his easy duties in a small, healthful, rural parish had for many years allowed him to gratify his passion, with the result that it was now beyond his powers to turn his mind effectually to teaching his grandson the things it seemed to him the boy must already know.

"Latin," he assured George gravely, "is extremely easy.

All you've got to do is to read it, and you know where all my books are. Help yourself,"—with the unexpected result that George at fifteen presented him with a little blank book filled with excellent but hair-raising translations from Catullus.

"Wh-where did you get that book, sir?" the old man stammered in all innocence.

George surveyed him mildly with his big, short-sighted gray eyes. "In the corner of the window—next the Horace, sir," he answered.

The poor Vicar had forgotten the book and spent a penitential day in going through his library and the dining-room (in which for lack of room they no longer took their meals) to weed out the books which were unsuitable to a boy of fifteen.

Alas! this mission of pious elimination was never accomplished, for the Vicar was one of those people who cannot look at books without looking into them, and when tea-time came it found a dusty, beatific old man crouching in a book-filled armchair, deep in a fine old copy of Castiglione's "Courtier," while the shabby carpet round him seethed an inchoate sea of volumes which, he explained vaguely, he was going to look at next.

It was George who had come in and George stood, his hands in the pockets of his shabby jacket, smiling whimsically at the scene.

"What are you going to do to them, Gran'pa?" he asked. Dr. Loxley closed his book, rose, and blew his nose, which he always did in moments of embarrassment.

"Well," he answered diplomatically, "they really ought to be arranged—according to subject, you know, and—somehow, I never have had time to do it, and it being such a very wet day, I thought——"

In the library, by the pleasant fire, the two sat down to their tea and while George, in accordance with a habit

dear to them both, toasted the tea-cake on an ancient, three-pronged toasting-fork, the subject was resumed.

"I suppose," the boy began, "that you think I ought not to read all the books. Is that it?"

The Vicar nodded, his ruddy, round face grave. "Yes."

"Porter never let us get at the poets much—that's why I made for Catullus when I found him the other day."

"Some of him is beautiful and delightful," said the Vicar "—this jam is *excellent*, my boy—and some of him —isn't."

"That's what Porter said. So I thought I'd just try. Are my translations good, Gran'pa?"

The Vicar was a truthful man by the grace of God. He spoke the truth as naturally as he breathed. So he nodded, his bright old eyes the brighter for his scholarly appreciation of his grandson's work.

"Yes, George, excellent. But—there are other things to translate. Why not try your hand at Horace?"

George, it appeared, had tried his hand at some of the Odes. Also, he had put one or two of Bacon's Essays into Latin. In this last feat the boy had been less successful, but, in the production and criticism of his work, the original reason for the Vicar's going through his library was lost sight of and the two passed a delightful, bookish afternoon, with no further thought of arranging the volumes.

Late that night Dr. Loxley woke suddenly, and sitting up in bed in the darkness, he remembered.

"Dear me, dear me," he whispered. "I must do it. He is only fifteen and he must not read all those books——"

It was October, and very stormy. Rain pelted against the windows, and the great trees in Widdybank Bottom

were holding high revel with the wind, while against the side of the house the bough of a great cedar seemed to be trying to saw itself in two, as it ground against the roof.

In his old four-poster the Vicar sat for a while, listening to the glorious uproar, then, lighting a candle with a glass shade to it, he rose, his old-fashioned nightshirt flapping round his fat legs as he passed the open window, and put on his dressing-gown. It was very cold and it had been luxuriously, almost romantically, pleasant to lie in bed and listen to the wind and rain. He paused for a moment and shivered. Then he went silently, resolutely, down the little winding stairs, feeling his way, for the stone steps were worn under the old carpet, and their narrow side was perilously narrow.

As the old man reached the little hall, he stood still, listening to the clock strike three.

"I'll work," he thought, "till six. I'll put all the ones he *mustn't* read in one corner and tell him. He will keep his word, the dear boy—and then he can browse as he likes——"

"After all," he thought, as he crept quietly towards the library door, "I don't believe the Catullus hurt him. He's just too young for that." And then he stood suddenly still, for there was a light on the carpet under the door. Naturally, the old gentleman thought it must be burglars, and creeping back to his room, he found his old revolver in a drawer, saw that it was loaded, and came silently downstairs again. He paused outside the library door, not frightened, filled with a pleasant spirit of adventure. He had no intention of shooting the thief, rather would he argue with him. He would ask him whence he came, he would ask if he was hungry, and offer him food; it was a cold night, and perhaps the poor fellow had been tempted in by the fire and light. Finally, making as little noise as possible, the old gentleman opened his library

door and there, quite naturally, as he at once realized, he found George, busily engaged in putting aside the books he ought not yet to read.

The boy, more delicate-looking than ever through his fatigue and the comparative cold, looked up nervously, and then, when he saw the revolver, gave a soft laugh.

"Gran'pa, how you frightened me! Did you think I was a burglar?" The Vicar laughed, too.

"I did. What in the name of goodness are you doing?" Suddenly his bonny old face hardened and he looked with suspicion at a book in the boy's hands.

"Surely, George——" he began.

George's steady, tired young eyes returned his gaze for a moment, and then comprehension came to him.

"Oh, Gran'pa," he burst out, his pale little face flushing, "how *could* you think that? How *could* you?"

He pointed to the green baize-covered, old writing-table, and there lay, neatly piled together, some dozen books.

"They are there," he went on passionately, adding the book he held to the collection. "All the ones I knew you wouldn't want me to read. How *could* you think——"

The Vicar set down his candle, laid the revolver by it, and, to gain time for his grandson, looked at the books on the table.

There was his Boccaccio, one of his greatest treasures, brought to England after Magliaveechi's sale in Florence early in the eighteenth century and bought by the Vicar's father at Hever's sale in 1834; his "Heptameron"; the fatal Catullus; his Rabelais, and many others.

After a pause, the Vicar went to where the boy was standing and laid his arm across the thin young shoulders. "George—I beg your pardon. Will you forgive me?"

George turned, his long lashes wet, his lower lip pinned

by his teeth but not quite steady. And as he held his hand, the old man kissed him and was forgiven. Subsequently, by way of a mild celebration, they made cocoa with milk, in a saucepan over the library fire, and ate biscuits with it.

As he munched, his bare feet in their old slippers tucked up on the fender, his dressing-gown wrapped tightly round him, George explained.

"I knew you'd never get—I mean to say, have *time* to sort them—the books," he said, "so I was going to do it for you. I had made a place for them—the ones I knew you wouldn't want me to read—in the niche there, and I was going to show you to-morrow."

"I see, dear. But—a little sugar, please, I've put too much cocoa in and it's bitter—how did you *know* which books I shouldn't want you to read?"

The boy looked candidly at him. "Oh, from school, of course, sir. The big fellows used to read Ovid and Catullus and Tibullus, and so on, and they talked a bit about 'em. And Barrington Major's father had the 'Decameron,' and he—Barrington Major—used to read it. He used to tell some of the stories but not to us little boys, only we heard bits—and as to Rabelais, Mr. Carter, the chemistry master, had him, and Billy Erskine 'borrowed' it one day and we all had a peep. It struck me," the lad went on, "as pretty filthy, so I thought I'd better count it in whether you said so or not——"

Dr. Loxley nodded. "It is. To tell you the truth, George, I've never read it through for that very reason. I keep it because it's a rare edition. By the way, I heard the other day that Sir Peregrine Janeways has a Venetian Boccaccio in his library. Just think of that!"

George, left perfectly cold by the information, helped himself to more cocoa, and his grandfather, forgetting who his listener was, pursued excitedly:

"A first edition, printed in 1471! They are extremely rare, I believe, because Savonarola preached against the book, so that most of the people burned theirs, the idiots——"

"Did they?" asked George, peacefully. "Well, now, look here, Gran'pa. I've got together all the ones I know about, and I do wish, sir, you *could* manage to find time to pick out the others and then we could put them all together; I'd never look at them, and you wouldn't mind my reading what I like amongst the others."

"Quite right. I'll do it to-morrow."

The clock struck five as he spoke and he rose, but George detained him.

"Oh, no, sir," he persisted gently, "please do it now. After all, there can't be so many more, and you a clergyman and all!"

So the Vicar, candle in hand, made a solemn round of his two rooms, and when he forgot where he was and stood too long looking into some book, George roused him and got him started again, so that by six o'clock the work was done, and George had put the forbidden fruit into a small orchard in a niche by itself.

Then the two went quietly back to their rooms, and at his door the boy threw his arms round his grandfather's neck and kissed him as simply as if he had been five instead of fifteen and a half.

After that night Dr. Loxley gave up his grandson's education into his grandson's own hands, and things were very pleasant at the old Vicarage.

It was in the second spring following that eventful night—and cocoa was henceforth always to be inextricably and inappropriately connected with naughty literature in George Loxley's mind—that the Vicarage and the Roseroofs were upset and thrilled to their marrows by the arrival of Rachel. Rachel really arrived in the usual

way, in an ancient fly from Middleton, but to Cuckoo Blundell her coming was a thing of mystery and romance.

For Cuckoo, aged at that time fourteen, had been sent by her Aunt Flora to the Vicarage as the bearer of an annual gift that from its persistence through many years had gained a certain high solemnity.

It had become in the homely calendar of Roseroofs, a red-letter day, one of those days from which lesser events are dated, such as "it was just after the day Maggie Walker sent the Christmas goose"; or "it was, I am sure, the day Benjie painted the kitchen-garden palings"; or "it was the day I sent the white violets to the Vicar." And that day in May was in future to be called "*The Day*": the day Rachel first came.

It was a lovely blue-and-gold morning, as Miss Flora with her own hands picked the big violets in her plot (kneeling on an immemorial square of old carpet, to protect her knees from the damp) and the garden was a place of promise and peace. Miss Effie's tulips already showed in her garden like small green lances and there were daffodils everywhere. It was a gay morning. Miss Flora wore her mushroom hat with the brown ribbon on it (the hat that, ten years before, on the day Cuckoo came had been new and rose-begarlanded) and an old brown Holland frock.

Cuckoo, in washed-out pink cotton, a leggy though not a tall Cuckoo, stood by her aunt, her hands clasped behind her, her lips pursed thoughtfully.

"You aren't leaving any for us," she exclaimed at length, as Miss Flora's long, thin hands went on with their work unfalteringly. "And there's heaps in the basket——"

Miss Flora's eyes, unchanged, in the years since the child's coming, but for the deeper and more thick-set

wrinkles round them, looked up reproachfully.

"I always give them *all* to the Vicar," she said.

"I know you do. And last year," the protester went on, ruthlessly, "he gave most of them to me. I wore 'em all day and you never noticed."

Miss Flora worked for a minute in silence.

"*I* noticed, Cuckoo! Do you think I couldn't recognize Flora's white violets?" Miss Effie, who had come up unheard on the thick, damp grass, glared fixedly at Cuckoo. "I'd have punished you for begging them of the Vicar, but I didn't want your Aunt Flora to know. And now you've told her!"

Miss Flora picked the last of the violets, brushing the thick leaves softly to and fro with her hand to see that none were lurking in their green fastnesses, and rose. She had not spoken and she did not speak now. When she disappeared into the dining-room, Miss Effie went on to the apparently unmoved Cuckoo, "You are a hard-hearted little minx, that's what you are. You care for no one but yourself, and if your Aunt Flora had heard you, which luckily she didn't——"

"Aunt Flora's as deaf as an adder," murmured the ruthless one, picking a daffodil and sticking it into her dark hair just over the ear.

Miss Effie blushed, her painful, unlovely blush.

"Your Aunt Flora," she protested, not quite truthfully, "is *not* deaf."

Cuckoo grinned, showing small, pointed, rather carnivorous-looking teeth, as white as a dog's.

"It isn't only *that*," she returned, swinging her hat by its elastic; "she's good-tempered, you know, and kind. She's as blind as a bat and always believes everything good of everybody, but for all that I love her. And," she added, "I only love you because you're my aunt. I'd love Aunt Flora if she was no relation at all."

Having made this announcement, the child moved slowly across the lawn to where old Benjie was turning over the earth of a flower-bed.

She and Benjie were very good friends, and though her English was now perfectly good and made only a little pungent by a tinge of North-countryism, yet she could and did talk his own dialect to Benjie.

Miss Effie's lips were drawn into a tight bunch as if pulled together by an invisible drawing-string, and her eyes were opaque-looking and angry as she gazed after her niece. Then suddenly, at the sound of Cuckoo's laugh, the old woman's grim face relaxed and she smiled and went into the house.

In the past ten years nothing had changed at Roseroofs. The very chintzes were the same, and if they were faded, the eyes of their mistresses and of Esther Oughtenshaw had grown dimmer, so that to the three old women no difference was perceptible.

Miss Flora was standing at the little table always called the flower-table, that stood by the window under the stairs, arranging her violets in the old osier basket in which for twenty years the first-fruits of her violet-bed had made their journey to Widdybank Vicarage.

The basket was filled with well-wetted stag's-horn moss and on this the violets were laid with great care, their heads all one way, their feet the other.

Miss Flora looked up as her sister came in.

"You look tired, Effie—is your heart bad again?"

Miss Effie shook her head and sat down on the bench under which the family over-shoes stood in a row.

"No, Flora," she returned primly, "I am quite well, thank you."

After a minute she added:

"Your violets are finer than ever this year."

Miss Flora smiled. "Yes, I think they really are," she

returned modestly, "and I believe your yellow tulips are going to be the very finest you've ever had. It *was* a good idea getting the bulbs direct from Holland."

As she spoke, her soft eyes suddenly changed and there was in them an odd, pained acuteness, as if they were seeing more than was comfortable for them to see. There was in Miss Effie's harsh, bony face a look that hurt her sister.

"What is Cuckoo doing?" Miss Flora asked, with an unusual edge in her voice.

Miss Effie looked up.

"Cuckoo? Oh, she's talking with Benjie Brigworthy."

"Was she—rude or anything, Effie?"

Miss Effie rubbed her nose with her bony forefinger.

"No, no, Flora. It's just that she's young."

Miss Flora's gaze relaxed and she went back to her work of laying the violets on the moss.

"That's it, Effie; you are right, as usual. As a rule you are perhaps a little hard on the child, so I feared, but it's just that—that she's young."

As they talked, a young and pretty girl in housemaid's dress came down the stairs and went into the study and a moment later was seen through the window by Cuckoo and Benjie Brigworthy.

"Hullo, Agnes," Cuckoo said, "come out here a moment."

"No, no, Miss Coocoo, ah must do my cleaning——"

For a moment Cuckoo watched her and then went on in her talk with the gardener. "She was crying again last night, Benjie," she said.

The old man spat reflectively. "Aye, like enough. She's a fool, is Agnes. So was 'er mother."

"Of course," Miss Blundell went on, "he is good-looking, Chris Greening——"

"U-ugh!"

She laughed. "I know, but he *is*, Benjie. He's a great, fine, strong man, and it's quite natural she should want to marry him, and you've no right to interfere, even if she *is* your niece."

The old man stuck his spade violently into the soft, damp earth; so violently that it stood up. With a quick movement he jerked down the sleeve of his old flannel shirt, and then, as if he now felt himself in sufficiently conventional attire to talk seriously, he turned.

"Look 'ee 'ere, Miss Coocoo," he began, maintaining his composure with difficulty, "don't you go and encourage the lass to do any foolishness. What's *looks* got to do with marrying? It's *brass* that counts, I tell 'ee. *Brass*. And yon lad hasn't a ha'penny. So don't you go upsetting her."

Cuckoo's odd eyes were ablaze with interest. They were not so small as they once were and their thick, short lashes cast distinct shadows on her cheeks, as she opened and closed them rapidly before speaking.

At last she said: "I know, Benjie. Nought's any good without brass. But if Chris hasn't any, neither has anyone else. Anyone for *Agnes*, I mean."

Old Brigworthy glanced cautiously round him.

"Look 'ere, Miss Coocoo," he answered, in a harsh undertone, "you're a sensible lass; I believe you *do* know what's what. All the things you've carneyed and coaxed out of your aunties—I like to see a young girl know what's what! Well now, look ye here. Isaac Vosper's got brass. And lots of it. Lots!"

The young girl's sallow cheeks showed two little spots of flame-color and her eyes glowed.

"Isaac Vosper? The old man's son! I didn't know he had a son. Or is it a grandson?"

"No son nor grandson. It's t'owd man hisself."

"But—that old man can't want to marry Agnes?"

There was in her voice a sincere horror, at which Brigworthy frowned sourly.

" 'E does then. He's not young, to be sure, but—Lord, t'brass t'man ha' gotten together! Horses he'd give her, and servant-maids, and rings and gowd chains—thirty-six cows he's got, and a draaa-in'-room at farm bettern' most gentlemen——"

After a pause, during which he allowed the glory of these possessions time to penetrate fully into his hearer's mind, the old man went on:

"And all o' them fine things could be hers. He's crazy about her—owd fewl!"

The invisible Agnes was now singing in a high, cheerful voice, as she worked in the study.

Cuckoo listened for a moment and then she asked slowly, her face darkened by profound thought, "How old is he, Benjie?"

"On'y six-and-fifty, Miss Coocoo——"

"All right, Benjie," she declared firmly, "I'll advise her to take him. I'll tell her—all about the beautiful things she could have, and besides," she added importantly, "there's another thing that you haven't thought of."

Benjie rolled his sleeves back up over his ropy, brown arms to his bony elbows.

"O—aye—Miss Coocoo?"

"I shall tell her," Robert Blundell's daughter declared firmly, with no trace of reluctance or shamefacedness, "that she must just be patient, and that he is sure to die before long."

Then she went into the house, put her basket over her arm, and started off down the short path to Widdybank. Her young mind full of Agnes, the ineligible Chris Greening, and the highly eligible Isaac Vosper, she crossed the

road leading up from Warcop, dived down into Flaye Ghyll, a deep, wooded ravine between the dale and Meldone Edge, crawled through the brushwood to the other side, then, by striking into the path from Flaye Ghyll itself to Widdybank, she saved herself nearly half an hour and reached the Vicarage by eleven o'clock.

And it was in the mood nursed by her talk with old Brigworthy and her musings about Agnes and her suitors, that she met Rachel Poole.

CHAPTER VIII

RACHEL POOLE was seated in the largest arm-chair in the Vicarage drawing-room, attired in pale blue silk edged with swan's-down.

Near her stood three large trunks, and in front of one of them knelt a narrow-shouldered, red-headed woman, whose mission in life appeared to be to burrow into the trunk and bring out objects desired by the sovereign in silk.

"*Eh bien, moi je vous dis,*" the sovereign was declaring, as Cuckoo stood in the door, "*qu'il y est.* I saw you put him there myself, with my own eyes I saw!"

Then, noting Cuckoo for the first time, the speaker added composedly to the newcomer, "She's a perfect idiot, you know! I told mamma so. I wanted Héloïse, but this one can't marcel for nuts, so she, mamma, made me bring it."

"Who are you?" asked Cuckoo, bluntly.

"I'm Lady Rachel Poole. Who are you?"

Cuckoo, furious with herself for being impressed by the title and the glory of the silken attire, returned with unusual grimness that she was Nicoleta Blundell.

At this, to her surprise, Lady Rachel descended from her throne and, approaching, held out her hand in a very friendly manner. "I'm *so* glad to see you," she said; "George has told me all about you."

Cuckoo shrugged her shoulders, for she was not nearly so tall as her new acquaintance, and this made her angry. "George is a nice boy," she remarked, with some hauteur,

"but he is very forgetful. He has never mentioned you to me."

At this moment the red-headed maid turned from the disembowelled box before which she knelt. "*Le voilà, Miladi,*" she cried, holding up a small, green silk umbrella with a jade handle.

"*Bon.* Didn't I tell you?"

Then Lady Rachel took Cuckoo by the arm and led her upstairs into the best bedroom, the one from whose window one of the Misses Plues, five years before, had watched Robert Blundell's funeral, and bade her sit down.

"They couldn't get our boxes up the stairs, so Jeanne has to unpack in the drawing-room. How old are you?"

"Nearly fifteen," answered Cuckoo carelessly, still struggling against the horrible feeling of rusticity and little-girlhood that Rachel's urban manner produced in her; "how old are you?"

"Oh, I'm sixteen. The third of last month. I'm just three years younger than George. His mother and my mother were sisters, you know, so we are cousins."

"Obviously," remarked Cuckoo, in her most high-nosed way. This new girl might be a ladyship, and tall, and fair, and pretty (Cuckoo never made the mistake of under-rating other people's advantages) but it was clear that she wasn't very brilliant.

The two sat down in little straight-backed chairs and regarded each other warily.

Lady Rachel was indeed a much taller girl than Cuckoo, and she was softer-looking as well. Her beautiful, fair skin was of the purest rosy white, and her heavy mass of straw-colored hair hung down over her shoulders smooth and broken and sculptural-looking, the hairs being apparently of exactly the same length. Her bare throat was velvety, almost downy-looking, and Cuckoo perceived with

a pang of envy that her breasts were already beautifully rounded.

For a moment the younger girl hated her own flat, bony little chest and could have beaten it in her jealous anger.

Then her face cleared suddenly, for the feet in quilted blue satin slippers that Lady Rachel had crossed were large and the ankles were thick.

Cuckoo stuck out one of her own narrow, bony little feet which, shod as they were by the Warcop shoemaker, yet showed their slim beauty and restored her trembling self-confidence.

"What pretty slippers those are," she said, smiling.

Rachel nodded. "Yes, aren't they? I got them at the Bon Marché. In Paris, you know——"

"Oh, yes, I know where the Bon Marché is. It isn't," Cuckoo added, with her singular air of hauteur, "so good as the shops in the rue de la Paix——"

Rachel stared. "Oh, so you've been there?"

Cuckoo, though she was being an outrageous snob for the moment, rarely lied.

"I've been there," she returned, "but I don't remember it much, I was very young. But of course I know about the rue de la Paix——"

Little by little the two girls made friends, and then came the episode of the green umbrella.

This umbrella, brought upstairs by Rachel and placed against the dressing-table, had been the object of many stolen glances from Cuckoo. Cuckoo had a passion for green, and this silk was of all greens the greenest and most ravishing. The umbrella was a small *entout-cas* of delicate shape, and its handle was a duck's head carved in jade.

Often, when she was older, Cuckoo recalled how fiercely, how unbearably, she had wanted that umbrella.

And, after much investigatory conversation, her chance came.

Rachel had explained that, her two little brothers, Angus and Jimmy, having developed scarlet fever, she had been packed off to Yorkshire to be out of harm's way; that she lived in Chesham Place; that Angus was thirteen and Jimmy—freckled, but adorable—only nine; that the place in Suffolk, Planings, was let for another two years to some perfectly frightful South African Jews, to save up for Angus' majority—(Oh, yes, Angus was the heir, at least, he wasn't the heir as he was already Lord Pelter, poor Papa being dead); and that Rachel was sure her mother would marry again before long, she was so pretty, and as, after all, she and poor Papa hadn't got on very well together. All these things had been poured into Cuckoo's little brown ears before the chance came. It came with a crash!

Rachel suddenly noticed the basket her new friend held and wanted to know—she was as curious as she was communicative—what was under the leaves.

Very carefully, for in spite of her young disdain of her Aunt Flora's funny little ways, she was not altogether unimpressed by the solemnity of the yearly offering, Cuckoo lifted off the broad, damp leaves and displayed the treasure.

And Rachel instantly wanted them. "*Do* give them to me, there's a dear," she begged. "You can get more, and I *do* want them! Let me have another sniff."

Cuckoo drew back. "Don't blow them," she said roughly.

"I don't want to blow them; I want to smell them, the angels. Oh, Nicky—I shall call you Nicky, I don't like Cuckoo—do be a lamb and let me have them!"

"No."

"Heavens, what a funny voice you have, like the wolf's in 'Red Riding-Hood!' *Do* let me have them. I *want* them, you see, and I always have my own way!"

"Well, you can't have these." Cuckoo rose and walked across the room, meaning to go down to the library and rid herself of her troublesome offering, but as she reached the door an idea occurred to her; an idea perfectly magnificent in its splendid lawlessness.

"You can't have everything you want in this world," she said slowly, turning and looking at Rachel, "*nobody* can. I want lots of things, too——"

"Well, what do you want? Of mine, I mean," asked the pampered Rachel eagerly. "Do you like corals? I'll give you my little ones for the violets!"

"I don't like corals and I loathe beads."

"Well, these slippers, then? You said you liked them, and I've got another pair——"

Cuckoo laughed. "They are," she answered, "miles too big for me. But, if you really like the violets so much, will you give me your green umbrella for them?"

Rachel looked bewildered for a moment, and then her eyes fell on the object of Cuckoo's passion. "Oh, that? Yes, you may have it if you like; I don't care for green, and I've got a pink one——"

Cuckoo's eyes, cleared a little of their bluish mist in her excitement, fixed on her new friend's. "Honor bright?"

"Honor bright."

"Then wait a moment, I must just speak to the Vicar," and she plunged downstairs before the slower-witted Rachel had time even to protest.

The Vicar was writing when she burst into the library, but he looked up kindly, for he was fond of the little girl, as he called her. He kissed her, patted her shoulder, and then she burst out. For three minutes she talked,

with a volubility and richness of gesture that surprised the quiet old man.

When she stopped, he shook his head. "But what on earth," he asked gently, "could I do with a green sunshade?"

However, she had, in a few minutes, coaxed him into accepting the violets, sending his love and thanks to Miss Flora, and then giving the violets to Cuckoo herself.

"I'll never tell, dearest Vicar," she assured him, kissing his pink bald spot, "but if she ever found out, I'd own up. Is that all right?"

It was, and an hour later Miss Blundell was marching back to Roseroofs, a green silk halo about her wicked little head. Never in her life had she been so happy; never in her life had she owned anything that so absolutely fulfilled her ideal of the beautiful.

She loved the umbrella, she loved Rachel, she loved the Vicar, she loved everybody. And as she walked she talked to herself, as her lonely walks had long since taught her to do.

"Yes," she declared airily, to an imaginary girl; a girl littler, darker, thinner than herself: "I'm fond of green; I have a rose-colored one, and a blue one, but this is my favorite. . . . And I prefer silk nightgowns, crêpe-de-Chine ones, with embroidery and lace. And my dressing-gowns, my dear," she went on, "are all silk, of course, and trimmed with—with powder-puff stuff——"

"Swan's-down, Kiddy," put in a new voice, and behold, there was George sitting on the grass with a book on his knees.

Interdicted, she stood staring up at him, her ears burning.

"I'm making believe," she declared, clutching at the boldness that for a moment had failed her, "it's great fun."

"It is," George agreed. "Where'd you get the brolly, Cuckoo?"

Climbing up to him, she sat down. "Rachel gave it to me. I say, George, why didn't you ever tell me you had a cousin in London?"

The youth smiled the sweet, lingering smile that so transfigured his pale, plain face.

"I d'know. I suppose I forgot. Isn't she pretty, Cuckoo?"

Cuckoo nodded. Safely in possession of the green umbrella, it was nothing to her how pretty Rachel was. "Yes, and her hair is lovely, isn't it?"

George Loxley at nearly nineteen looked not much more than sixteen, so childlike were his great eyes, so innocent of a mustache his whimsically curved lips. He had already reached his not very imposing full height and his too short coat-sleeves revealed his wrists to be bony and ugly, and as white as milk.

His hat lay on the ground beside him and his usually smooth hair was ruffled.

Cuckoo surveyed him critically, wondering what the grand Rachel would think of him. She herself was fond of George in her cool way, for he had always been kind to her, despite the fact that he often disapproved her naughtiness and openly sided, in their frequent disputes, against her and with the aunts.

The aunts had always loved the gentle, quiet boy, and on more than one occasion Miss Flora had transplanted herself to the Vicarage, to nurse him through one of his childish illnesses. Once, when, at the age of twelve, he was deep in Cowper's translation of the Iliad, Miss Flora, to soothe a feverish night, had read to him, hour after hour, out of some old book of fairy-tales. He endured it very patiently and never told her how bored he was, and after that, of course, he loved her all the better. So the

lad felt towards the small, black-haired child at Rose-roofs much as he would have felt towards a naughty little sister, and her aunts were doubtless dearer to him than they were to her.

He looked at her now with mildly critical eyes as she peacocked with the green umbrella.

"Are you being good to the aunts, Kiddy?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes. What are you reading, Dead?"

"Keats."

"What is a Keat, George?"

But he caught the gleam in her downcast eyes, refused to be drawn and went on. "What are you studying now?"

"Oh, it's Aunt Flora's turn at me, so I'm busy with embroidery and the piano. I don't like them much, but they're better than Euclid and Ancient History," she returned, indifferently, "Aunt Effie was dreadful this time with the Romans. I hate Romans."

"I see. What about literature?"

Cuckoo laughed. "Oh, that's better. Wordsworth, and Coleridge and Mrs. Hemans. Mrs. Hemans," she commented, "goes splendidly with fuchsias in silk."

After a pause she continued in a different voice, "Do you know, George, Rachel thought Troy was in Egypt; she told me so! She had a perfectly splendid governess, a Frenchwoman, *such* a darling! They never had any lessons at all!"

"Splendid governess, indeed! Well, are you off?"

"Yes, the Vicar asked me to stay to lunch, but there's curried mutton at the Vicarage, and *we're* having Chocolate Puff-up-and-Busts, so I said I'd come back after lunch."

Thus clearly explaining her reasons for refusing the hospitality of the Vicarage, she went her way along the

slope, twirling and swinging the sunshade and pausing every now and then to admire it.

Young Loxley watched her for a while and then returned to his book. He had two roast beef sandwiches in his pocket and was not going home to lunch.

The coming of Rachel had distracted him, but only as it had disturbed his grandfather; he was too young, nearly nineteen though he was, to have experienced any pleasanter kind of emotion over the arrival in the Vicarage of a pretty girl.

Very young he was, and very young he looked, as he sat there in the sun—for he was a chilly creature—his pale, long face bent over old Howell's delightful letters.

Lady Rachel Poole stayed at Widdybank the greater part of the summer, and she and Cuckoo were during the whole of the time inseparable, except during the hours when Cuckoo was with Miss Flora, undergoing the process of education. Miss Flora was very conscientious about this education; she had not forgotten her promise to Blundell and to the best of her powers she was fulfilling it. Cuckoo could embroider, though she had no particular liking for it; she played the piano in an old-fashioned, high-fingered little way; she knew miles of verse by heart. Aunt Flora's lessons were at least less irksome than Aunt Effie's, she thought.

In the first flow of their friendship the two girls tried to work together, but this plan was soon given up.

Rachel was lazy, luxurious, and grown-up in ways in which Cuckoo was still a child, and Wordsworth bored her to extinction, though she derived some entertainment from an old volume of Byron that she found in the study, and her clumsiness with a needle was too much for even Miss Flora's long-suffering.

"I feel that you hurt the silk, jerking it that way," Miss Flora burst out one day, in her highest voice. "I can't bear to see it——"

So Cuckoo's lessons, after a very short interval of companionship, went on as before, alone with her instructress.

Rachel, although as vain as are most pretty girls with no brains to speak of, had a kind of adoration for her new friend, for Cuckoo was bold and brave and never changed her mind, whereas Rachel's was a fluid, unstable character, changing under every influence. She could, however, beat Cuckoo in many varieties of grown-upness and in the matter of belongings her superiority was crushing.

Rachel had a necklet of small pearls, and two pretty rings; she had delicate, filmy under-linen, tucked and belaced; she had soft, kid slippers with soles so flexible that they could be bent double; and sashes that were satin on one side and silk on the other; she had hats gay and delightful with flowers exactly like real ones, and long, wrinkly gloves, whose fingers really reached to the roots of her fingers instead of stopping half-way between them and the second joint. Lucky Rachel!

And then, her wonderful toilet things! Scented soap she had, and lots of sponges, and tooth-paste that squeedged out of the tubes in jolly white worms, instead of nasty, scratchy, precipitated chalk; and elder-flower water for her skin, and glycerine-and-honey jelly for her hands; and heavenly skin-food that smelt of roses for her face at night; and purple crystal things that turned her bath into a dream of delight.

And of these wonderful, desirable things, Cuckoo had none.

George, though silent and ordinarily dreamy, was not without observation and, knowing Cuckoo, he watched her

closely during the first fortnight of his cousin's visit for signs of envy.

He watched in vain and the reason is this: at first Rachel's belongings seemed to Cuckoo miraculous; then she saw that they were merely luxurious; and very soon she realized them to be not really luxurious, but merely necessities, sheer necessities of life.

And whereas she herself could never have hoped to attain to the miraculous, and barely to the luxurious, she knew that to life's necessities she could and would attain. She, Cuckoo, must, and would, have all the things Rachel already so carelessly possessed.

This conviction, not arrived at by determination but by a kind of inward evolution, brought with it complete lack of envy and a kind of high peace.

Not only would she one day have all that Rachel had, but when her time came she would improve on Rachel's things. Orange-flower water, for instance, instead of elder-flower; her gloves should all be pale tan, instead of gray; and scent that smelt of *real* violets, whereas Rachel's Violette de Parme smelt of vanilla. Oh, yes, she would improve on Rachel, when—not *if*, there was no *if* in her mind—her time came!

Meantime, Miss Effie and Miss Flora were both moved to admiration at what they considered their niece's singular lack of envy.

Cuckoo's almost abnormal acquisitiveness had always troubled them, although they had never directly discussed it, and they had both feared that her lust of possession would have been violently stirred by her new friend's magnificent belongings.

And when they perceived her serenity, even when confronted by a new embroidered muslin frock that the conceited Rachel, so to speak, brandished under her very nose, Miss Effie couldn't resist commenting on it.

"I am pleased with Cuckoo, Flora," she said. "In spite of all Rachel's beautiful things she is as satisfied as ever with her own simple ones——"

"Yes, I'm so pleased you noticed that, Effie." Miss Flora gave her little nervous laugh. "I was a little afraid——"

"*H'm!* Yes, so was I. However, we were both wrong."

Miss Flora's laugh melted into her odd, fixed smile that looked so nearly vacant. "Yes, we were wrong; I am so glad you noticed it, too."

Miss Effie straightened herself in her chair. "I know what you mean, Flora. You always think I'm hard on the child and perhaps I may be. I have reasons of which you do not know, but—I hope I am never *unfair*, even though I happen to have sharp eyes," she said, austerely.

Rachel "adored" Aunt Flora, whom she called quaint and delicious; Aunt Effie she disliked and said so. "I really don't like her, you know," she said to Cuckoo, "and I can't help telling you so. I'm frightfully frank," she added, "really horribly downright, and always say what I think."

Cuckoo listened to these self-interpretations, not being downright enough herself to disagree audibly with them.

The affair of pretty Agnes Watlass and her two suitors greatly interested the girls, and they spent hours discussing it, particularly after one evening when, walking for a wonder in silence across the grass on the uplands, they came on Agnes and Chris Greening wrapped in each other's arms as they said good-night.

"My word," gasped Cuckoo, when the lovers, without seeing them, had separated and gone beyond earshot, "I thought they were never going to stop."

She laughed, the easy, unembarrassed laugh of a child.

Rachel did not laugh. "They really love each other, you see," she explained with some loftiness. "It reminded

me of—'a man had given all other something or other for this,

'To waste his whole life in one kiss
Upon those perfect lips,——' "

Cuckoo grew round-eyed. "My goodness, Ray," she exclaimed, "poor Agnes' lips aren't perfect. But I know that thing. It's Tennyson. I always wondered what it meant."

Rachel sighed, with an "I-could-an-I-would" manner. "You are a baby, Nicky! Of course I know more than you, for I've a married sister. Although," she added, "poor Phil is, of course, a hopeless outsider."

"Mr. Brinkley is?" Cuckoo asked briskly; "then why did Rosamund marry him?"

"She married him for sixty thousand pounds a year, my child."

Cuckoo drew a deep breath. "Oh, well, there," she returned, with conviction, "*of course!*"

Rachel looked at her in some surprise. "How funnily you said that! It really is awful, Nicky. Once, in the beginning, he actually called poor mamma 'your ladyship.' "

There was a pause, and then Cuckoo remarked tensely, "I shouldn't care if he called her 'ma-am,' if he had sixty thousand pounds a year."

They had reached the road leading along the top of the Edge, and paused, struck, despite their young egotism and curiosities, by the beauty of the scene.

The sky to westward looked like liquid gold, and round about them the high moorland, violet patched with deep purple, gradually warmed, blossomed, as it seemed, in the light.

Immediately below where they stood the hill was devas-

tated and torn by an ancient deserted lead-mine. It gaped, all rough heaps of stone and ugly dark holes, like a gigantic, half-healed wound. "The Cold Comfort Mine," Cuckoo explained, in answer to her friend's question. "An old Roman lead mine."

"How hideous it is!"

Cuckoo nodded. "Yes. Only—it makes the sky and the moorland look all the more splendid. Like—like—like Mr. Brinkley's manners and his sixty thousand pounds a year!"

"You are a queer thing, Nicky! I believe you are really and truly mercenary."

"I am."

"It's awfully funny, when you're so young"—but however interesting Cuckoo's peculiarities might be, Rachel's own personality was far more engrossing to Rachel and she went on, "*I'm* not—mercenary, I mean. We're fearfully poor, of course, and I'd love to be rich, but—I wouldn't have married Phil Brinkley if he'd had a million a year."

Cuckoo looked at her shrewdly. "Love in a cottage for you, I suppose?"

The elder girl gave a sentimental little laugh.

"Oh, I'd *prefer* a big house, of course, but—if I loved a poor man I'd marry him. I suppose I'm a fool but I would. I should love to *work* for him, I'd even cook—I *couldn't* marry a man I didn't love——"

These mature reflections were interrupted ruthlessly by Miss Blundell, who, pausing at the top of the path by the Green Bench, made her declaration of faith.

"I," she said slowly, speaking rather to the listening dale than to Rachel, "would marry *anyone* who had plenty of money. I'd marry the ugliest, beastliest, vulgarest man in the world—if he was rich enough."

Rachel's disapproval, however, was not unmixed with

admiration. "You *wouldn't*, Nicky," she cried. "Think of breakfast every day. Think," she went on, with a quick glance round, "of him *in bed*."

Cuckoo's eyes, dulling as was their way in her moments of deep feeling, were fixed on the beautiful rose-colored roofs in the trees below them. "I shouldn't mind a bit," she answered slowly, obviously missing the elder girl's point, "not one bit. If he was rich enough. I'd marry a black man if he was."

Beaten and abashed by this splendid determination, Rachel gave up, openly, however, declaring for romance.

"Well," she said, "I wouldn't. You are too young, I s'pose, to understand about love, but I——"

"Oh, bosh, Ray! What do *you* know about it, with your hair still down! Come along, I'll race you to the gate——"

But at the gate, Rachel, as she sat on the grass saying good-night, reverted to the subject.

"Suppose your rich man was unfaithful to you?"

Cuckoo chewed a blade of grass and then spat it out unblushingly. "How d'you mean?"

"Well, some men are, and it's horrid. It's awful, Nicky darling!"

"Oh, you mean running away?" commented Cuckoo coldly. "I know. The draper's wife at Upshaw ran away with a commercial traveler. She left the children behind."

Rachel shuddered. "Evy Rainsford left her baby—and it died. She bolted with Pelly Janeways. Oh, Nicky," she continued in a voice of rapture, "now *there's* a man!"

"He's old," answered Cuckoo, indifferently. "I know him, and he's years older than my father——"

Rachel gave a little scream of excitement. "*No*, Cuckoo! You can't mean it. That you actually know him? Why, he's the most fascinating man in the world. He's been three times in the divorce court—he married

two of them—he's called the Magnificent—from some old Italian, Lorenzo something or other—he's really Italian, you know. *Isn't* he a pet, and aren't his eyes too wonderful?"

Cuckoo laughed. "He promised me a pony and never gave it to me," she said. "I thought him an old pig, if you ask me!"

As the two girls kissed each other good-night, Rachel promised to continue the story of Sir Peregrine Janeways the next day.

"He's *wonderful*, whatever you may say," she declared. "And he owns the most wonderful jewels. Did you ever hear about the Bag of Saffron?"

"No. You put saffron in puddings, don't you?"

But this bag of saffron, it seemed, was a wonderful jewel on a diamond chain. "Mamma once saw it—his mother used to wear it when mamma was a little girl—good-night, darling," concluded Rachel, with a last kiss. "I'll tell you all about it tomorrow."

CHAPTER IX

THERE was, however, no time for talk about Sir Peregrine Janeways' jewels the next day, for this was the day of Agnes and Chris. It was a very marvelous adventure, the affair of Agnes and Chris.

Early in the morning Cuckoo waked, conscious that she had just heard a strange noise. It was very early, but her little room, which faced the east, was already filled with a clear light of extreme purity that made the white-washed walls look luminous. The young girl, sitting up in bed facing the window, her thin shoulders and arms covered by an ample and unadorned nightgown, gazed round her. What could the noise have been? She was not afraid; she was expectant; of what, she didn't know, but she was so constituted that any event was to her preferable to monotony. Her little clock told her that it was only half-past four, and even old Esther Oughtenshaw, she knew, would not be up until six. Yet someone in the house was afoot. When, after a moment's tense waiting, she heard a sound in the hall downstairs, she rose, and, without pausing to put on her dressing-gown, went quietly down. The very fact of being awake at such an hour was in a way an adventure, and being up and about was a thing not to be described in its delightful strangeness. The clock's tick seemed heavy with mystery, and the pale glow coming in through the fanlight had an odd effect on the shabby old hall.

Very quickly Cuckoo went down the passage and opened the kitchen door.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, disappointedly, "it's only *you!*"

But to Agnes it was not only she. She—Agnes—was at that moment the very center of the universe. She started violently, the tea-kettle in her hand, and stood staring at the intruder, who, whatever Agnes might be doing, certainly had no business in the kitchen at such an hour.

"Miss Coocoo," she faltered, setting the kettle on the tiny grate in the middle of the stove and drawing back.

Cuckoo sat down in a high-backed wooden chair and held her hands up to the delicate, fleeting fire that the elder girl had made with a few twigs.

"I know what you are up to, Agnes," she said severely. "You are going to run away with Chris Greening."

Agnes turned pale, her poor, swollen eyes full of amazement and horror.

"Oh, Miss Coocoo——"

"Yes, you are. But," added Cuckoo, thoroughly enjoying herself, "you *mustn't*."

"You don't know what you're saying, Miss Coocoo—and you'd better go back to your bed. Your aunties would be very angry if they knew you were up so early."

"My aunties would be very angry if they knew what a silly thing you were going to do. And the kettle's boiling. I'll have some tea, too, Agnes."

Agnes made the tea and cut some bread and butter, presenting it to her young mistress in spite of her mental torment, with perfect decency on a tray.

"I was up on the Edge last night," Cuckoo observed, her eyes glinting in the strengthening light. "I saw you and Chris, I saw you kiss each other."

"Oh, Lord!" murmured Agnes. "I told him he mustn't——"

"You can't have told him very hard. Well, so now you're going to sneak out and marry him! Is that it?"

The elder girl stared at her. There was something

singularly unyouthful in her lack of tenderness towards romance and Agnes felt it.

"Ye don't understand," she retorted dreamily, "you're too young, I suppose. But it isn't sneaking. It's—it's just t'contrary to sneaking."

"*How* is it? What do you mean?" insisted the uninvited judge, not allowing her zest to interfere with her appetite. "Cut me some more bread and butter, please. What d'you mean?"

The loaf pressed to her shapely breast, the knife working its way through the bread, Agnes tried to explain enough without explaining too much.

"He's going to marry me," she murmured, "he's a good fellow, not like some, and we're going to be married."

Cuckoo frowned impatiently.

"Of course you're going to be married," she returned, "I know that—or you *think* you are. But you can't be married today, you know. Where are you going?"

"To Maggie Watlass's—her mother was my mother's cousin. He's told her and she will let me stay there. Only you mustn't tell, Miss Coocoo, or my uncle and my brother will come there and make a fuss—promise you won't tell!"

Agnes' bonny face, restored to its natural color by the fire and the tea and bread and butter, was turned anxiously to Cuckoo.

Cuckoo was silent for a moment.

"Chris is a farm-laborer, isn't he?" she asked.

"Aye. He works for William Christy——"

"What wages does he get?"

Agnes faltered. "Only ten shillings a week yet, and his lodgings, but he's a good worker, an'——"

"Once a farm-laborer, always a farm-laborer," interrupted Cuckoo trenchantly. "Has he a cottage?"

Agnes set down her cup. "No-o, Miss Coocoo, but——"

"Have *you* a cottage?"

"Oh, Miss Coocoo,"——

"Be quiet, Agnes, and answer what I ask you." (There is no use in trying to hide the horrid fact that Miss Coocoo was thoroughly enjoying, and as thoroughly appreciating, herself.)

"Has Chris any money? His father may have left him some,"—

Agnes was silent. She knew, and she knew that her inquisitor knew, that poor old Anty Greening had died in the workhouse at Warcop.

"Perhaps, then," Cuckoo went on, putting some coals softly on the waning fire, "*you* have the money? Just a little, say—fifty pounds, or so, to furnish a cottage with?"

And she watched Agnes, utterly down-hearted, burst into tears, crying unrestrainedly, her mouth screwed up like a child's.

"Why do you make me so miserable?" she moaned. "You like to hurt me, of course you do! It's crool of you, Miss Coocoo! As if things wasn't bad enough already——"

Cuckoo shook her head. "No, I don't like to, Agnes. I like you, and I don't want you to be miserable all your life."

"Miserable!" wailed the other girl, searching wildly in her pockets for a handkerchief; "if you knew how miserable I've been ever since——"

She blew her nose with violence, her wet eyes suddenly filled with fear.

"I know you are miserable, I've often seen you crying. But think what it would be if you were married! You'd have to live in a two-room cottage, you couldn't keep a cow, you'd have no pigs for bacon, Chris would be away all day working, and you'd have to work so hard yourself

that you'd be old and ugly in a year and then Chris wouldn't love you any more."

After this lurid forecast Cuckoo rose and opened the door, letting in a flood of warm light—for the pale sun had been gathering gold as they talked—and a great gust of earth and flower-scented air.

Agnes was silent and quite still for a moment, and finally Cuckoo turned from the view and looked back into the kitchen, in whose furthest recesses the night still seemed to linger.

Agnes stood by the table, her hands tight-clasped before her, her face suddenly set and white.

"Ah know—Ah know all them things," she said, in a whisper. "Me an' him has said 'em often and often. But Ah can't help it, Miss Coocoo. Ah must do it. He's a good lad, Chris. He'd never throw it in my face,"——

"Throw what in your face? He loves you, doesn't he?"

Agnes was only twenty herself, but at that moment she felt twenty years older than the fifteen-year-old girl who didn't understand.

"A-aye, he loöves me and all—but," she faltered and twisted her brown hands as if she were trying to pull the fingers off. "Ah, Miss Coocoo," she burst out presently, "go back to your bed. I must go—he's waiting for me, poor lad, I must go. I've thought and thought, and there's nowt else to be done."

And then came Cuckoo's great moment.

Going slowly to the other girl, she reached up and put her hands on the broad, strong shoulders in the black jacket.

"There *is* owt to be done," she declared, speaking purposely in Agnes' own language; "you can marry Isaac Vosper."

Agnes started, horror in her eyes. "Owd Vosper? Me

marry him? No, never, rich as he is, not even if——" She broke off and gathered up her few belongings preparatory to going.

"Not even if what? He is rich, *very* rich. He'd give you all the brass you want and servants, and you'd have horses and cows and pigs. Don't be an idiot, Agnes. Marry him!"

Chris Greening, his silly young heart full of rapture and trouble, was waiting for his sweetheart at the may-tree by the short cut leading to the Middleton Road, on its way to where, at Canty Bridge, lived the kind Maggie Watlass.

The poor lad had begged a day off from work and had come to meet his sweetheart dressed in his best; in his coat he had stuck a bunch of ragged white pinks, and his curly hair was oiled and smelt of cinnamon.

He was a comely young fellow, even in his unbeautifying Sunday glory of attire, and the pallor that underlay his tan gave his clear-cut face an odd look of having been powdered.

Agnes had promised to join him at five. At half-past he began to feel anxious, and his round blue eyes were fixed on the path as it rose towards Roseroofs. He never knew how near he had come that morning to a life of miserable grinding poverty with the girl he honestly loved; by how small a margin he missed a year of rapture and a later life out of which the glow of romance had died. His was a predicament as old as the world itself; either way he stood to win and to lose and he lost and won.

For, just as she reached the door to go to him, Agnes stood still, struck dumb and motionless with terror. Someone was coming downstairs! And she knew that someone could only be her aunt, Esther Oughtenshaw.

As she stood, trembling with terror, Cuckoo, in the quick transition of her position from one of defeat to one of victory, nimble-witted and triumphant, opened the cellar-door, whispering, "I'll get your print frock and apron for you"—closed the door, and met the unsuspicious Esther Oughtenshaw with a beaming smile.

"I couldn't sleep, Esther, so I waked Agnes and had her make me some tea. She's gone to dress now——" And in five minutes she had flown to poor Agnes' bare, dismantled little room, found her ordinary morning clothes and thrown them to her through the cellar window under the dining-room.

Poor Chris, at six o'clock, turned sorrowfully back and went to his work as usual, his heart aching as if it had never held a doubt.

All he remembered was that he loved Agnes, and that, though he was, as he as well as she innocently expressed it, willing to marry her, she had played him false. On his way back to the farm he passed along the path leading to the Green Bench, and here, very thoughtful, hunched up, her arms clasping her raised knees, was Cuckoo.

"Fine morning, Miss Coocoo," Greening said politely as he passed.

"Aye. Looks like rain, though," she returned, as mechanically. Then, as he turned the corner, she called him. "Chris!"

"A-aye, Miss Coocoo?"

His hurt love and pride had imprinted themselves clearly in his simple face, and Cuckoo was sorry for him.

"Agnes—didn't come, Chris," she said, gently.

"N—o. She didn't coom,"——

"I'm very sorry for you, Chris, and for her."

But Chris didn't care a rush whether Miss Cuckoo was sorry for him or not. He stared at her dully.

"It's better to tell you at once, Chris. She is not going to marry you. It would be very foolish for you both. You would be so miserably poor."

Chris scratched his head. This was no new idea to him and had cost him much thought, but he had made up his mind to disregard it, and now, knowing that Agnes had decided *not* to disregard it, a salutary sensation of indignation came into his mind. He expressed himself with terseness and vigor, and leaving Cuckoo with a very roughly-worded message for the faithless Agnes, went his way.

After an hour's hard thinking and a short visit to the house, for the purpose of breakfasting—for she found that matrimonial advice had produced in her a great hunger—Cuckoo went out and, after an interval of two hours, arrived in visibly high feather at the Vicarage.

When she had told the whole story, vividly detailed, to the delighted Rachel, she stopped and drew a long breath.

"So he said," she added after a moment, "that he was very much obliged to me and would step round this evening. That means, of course, that he's going to ask her again. And she's promised me to say yes. Isn't it splendid?"

Rachel nodded thoughtfully. "Yes."

"It really is a jolly old farm, you know, Ray, and he wasn't so *very* awful. *What* a good thing I heard her this morning! I only hope," she went on, lying back on the hillside, and staring up at the sky, "that she won't back out."

Rachel glanced at her. "No danger of that," she observed dryly, and with an air of wisdom that did not escape Cuckoo, "she'll be jolly glad to be married."

Cuckoo chewed the end of a piece of grass. "Not so sure. You see, she really does care for Chris. It'll take

her some time to be able to make up her mind to marry old Vosper. It would even me, if I had a—a Chris and a Vosper. You know what I mean."

Rachel nodded. "You're a funny kid, Nicky," she declared, in an unbearably grown-up manner.

Just then George appeared, wandering along in his desultory way, his cap in one pocket, a book in another. He was singing softly in what Cuckoo called his baby voice, for though he was nineteen, his voice had never cracked, but was slowly mellowing into a deep tenor, a process which still, at times, allowed him, when he sang very softly, to produce a few bars, in a kind of soprano as beautiful as a child's.

"I say, George," Rachel called, as he was about to pass without seeing them, "come and hear what Cuckoo's been up to,"——

The lad obeyed, sitting by them. "What *has* she been up to?" he asked, looking on Rachel with the content the sight of her smooth beauty never failed to produce in him.

"She's been match-making."

"Match-making?"

"Yes. She's arranged a marriage," Rachel went on gaily, bridling a little under his eyes, "between Agnes, their maid—and a Mr. Vosper."

George started. "Vosper? Old Ike? Nonsense, Rachel."

"It's quite true. Isn't it, Nicky?"

Cuckoo nodded.

"But——" George's pale brows knotted nervously, "Agnes is—engaged to—another man. At least I think so,——"

Cuckoo sat up. "She *was*. Now she isn't. I stopped her running away with that silly Chris Greening. Ten shillings a week they'd have had to live on!"

"But, Cuckoo——" the boy broke off, his pale face flushed. "I—I wish you hadn't. They—they really were engaged. Seriously. *Very* seriously. Why did you interfere?"

"Don't be stupid, George. How are two people to live on ten shillings a week? Besides," she added grown-upedly, "they'd be sure to have a lot of babies. Those people always do."

George rose. "Good-bye," he said, "I'll—I'll just go——"

When he had gone, Rachel gave a meaning giggle.

"You really are a baby, Nicky," she exclaimed. "Poor George nearly burst with embarrassment."

"Nonsense! Why should George be embarrassed?"

And then Rachel told her, told her as some girls of her age do tell such sordid, piteous little tragedies, with a gloating and lingering enjoyment.

To do Cuckoo justice, she derived no pleasure from the tale. She listened coldly, a little ashamed of her own ignorance, but the thing that remained in her mind as the vital part of the whole business was still old Isaac Vosper's brass.

"He's not a bad old thing," she declared, "and he's really very rich for a farmer, so at least *It* can be well looked after if she marries him."

"But she won't dare tell him," elucidated Rachel. "Lots of girls kill theirs, rather than be found out."

"Bosh! Of course she'll tell him, and no doubt he'll be glad to have one ready-made, so to speak. An old man like him!"

But she was very angry when, at this remarkable prognostication, the wise Rachel burst into a shout of laughter.

CHAPTER X

EVERY Christmas there arrived at Roseroofs a big box of gifts from Lady Fabricius. The greater part of these offerings being in the form of clothes, they were always sent in an odd trunk of her ladyship's, and to Cuckoo those trunks were things of romance and mystery.

For her Aunt Marcia had always been, in a commonplace way, a great traveler, and these old black leather boxes with "M. A. F." painted in large white letters on them, were covered with old labels, and, moreover, traveling boxes are intrinsically beautiful and romantic things. To Lucerne, Lady Fabricius had been, Hôtel National; to Venice, "Danieli's"; to Rome, the "Grand"; to Munich, the "Continental"; to Paris, Hôtel Bristol; to Aix-les-Bains, Hôtel de l'Europe; to Homburg, Hôtel Victoria; to Sorrento, "Tramontana's"; and so on and so on in an apparently endless trail all over the continent of Europe.

And for Cuckoo, in whose blood was, as her father had said, the fatal roving drop, the torn, disfigured labels had a most potent charm. Sometimes one label hid another and had to be peeled off with moisture and delicacy, to discover what was under it; sometimes only a red or yellow scrap remained, and it was a fascinating puzzle to think over all the towns ending in, say, "ig" or "en," and decide what the missing letters were. Often one's dreams of places are better than the places themselves, and, a large old map of Europe on the floor beside her, Cuckoo spent many hours travelling in imagination to all the cities to which the shabby box beside her had had the

privilege of going. One cold December evening when she was eighteen, the young girl was sitting by the fire in the study engrossed in this entrancing make-believe, a new trunk having just arrived.

It was half-past five, tea was over and the big, old moderator lamp was lit. In the old-fashioned, black-leaded grate the fire blazed cozily, and Cuckoo, on the floor, the lamp drawn near the edge of the table, had just, in her mind, arrived in Paris at a new hotel called the "Ritz." (Formerly she had put up, in these visits, at "Meurice's.") Her feet under her, her hands—still thin and small and dusky—clasped on her lap, the girl was busy with her dream-visit to Paris. She had not been there since her babyhood: she had never been to London since her father brought her through it on her way to Roseroofs, on which occasion he had given her to believe she had distinguished herself by being sick in the cab that brought her from the station to the hotel: she had been nowhere except into York to see a dentist, and once, after measles, to Whitby. She had, in accordance with her father's wishes, lived entirely at Roseroofs.

But the drop was in her blood, and her hour-long poring over maps had caused much anxiety, though but little discussion, to her aunts. An old Continental Bradshaw that had been her father's was also one of her most cherished treasures and this lay on the floor by her now, for, to her surprise, a Budapest hotel label on the trunk had informed her that her aunt had been extending her travels that much out of the beaten track, and she had in imagination been journeying from Buda to Paris via Vienna and Frankfort, in strict accordance with the train-service of fifteen years before.

The firelight and lamplight falling full on her showed her to have changed as little since the occasion of Rachel Poole's first visit to the dale, as would be possible for

any girl between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. She was still small and thin and undeveloped, and her thick, black hair, though now neatly packed in plaits tight to her little head, still looked too heavy for her thin neck to carry.

Her lower jaw distinctly jutted, and her dream-filled eyes were dull with intentness. Her body sat there on the shabby rug in the study, waiting for Aunt Effie to come in and open the box, but her young mind had gone forth in search of adventure. She had never been told that she was to go to London to her unknown aunt. So far as she actually knew, she was to stay on for ever at Roseroofs. But with no discussion of the subject, even mental, she knew that she should not be always at Roseroofs. She knew it just as she had known that she would one day own beautiful things like Rachel's. Miss Effie and Miss Flora had once or twice touched, very lightly, to each other, on her amazing contentment in her quiet life.

"Of course," Miss Flora said, "there is no place like the dale, but at her age, Effie, one shouldn't have wondered if——"

Miss Effie, on whose granite exterior time seemed to make no more effect than it did on the walls of their house, nodded. "It is a pleasant surprise to me, Flora, that she should be so satisfied. I had anticipated restlessness and discontent in her, but then you'll say that I am naturally suspicious."

Miss Flora, whom the passing years were dimming and blurring a little in everything but her springing, jocund carriage, looked at her sister with a sweet, peculiar little smile. She had said nothing of the kind but she did not deny the imputed charge, and Miss Effie went on, "I must admit too, Flora, that the life would not have suited *me*. But then I was always so full of energy."

The next time a foreign letter arrived for Cuckoo from

Rachel, the two old ladies eyed her cautiously as she read it.

"They're at Bellagio," the girl told them, "isn't it delightful?"

And how could they know that her lack of envy sprang from her calm certainty that before long her own time for Bellagio would come?

Bellagio and Buda, Paris, Seville and Simla. These places would be hers as naturally as her twentieth year or her first gray hair. There was plenty of time. It may be said that most young creatures naturally expect all the good things of the world to come their way and this, of course, is true. It is one of God's blessings that it is true. But Cuckoo was in one way, if not in this, an exception to other maidens. She valued her own youth. Every day, as it came, was to her a delightful and good thing; she had no desire to hurry events.

So, that evening, as she sat on the floor by the trunk, she was perfectly happy. Roseroofs, as her thoughts came back to it from Hungary, was an excellent perch, but it never occurred to her to regard it as a nest.

Presently her thoughts settled like a swarm of friendly bees on George Loxley, for the trunk had been to St. Moritz, and at St. Moritz George had spent part of the last summer.

Now the poor dear was back in Glasgow, in a bank, of all places in the world for him, although Mr. Fleming, who was the president of the bank, was an old friend of the Vicar's and very fond of the young man.

Cuckoo had not seen George for eighteen months, and she wondered how he was getting on. She remembered the day when she had found him lying in the bracken, his face hidden, the day after the news came that something had happened whereby his grandfather's income was reduced by one half.

His paint-box—for he had told the girl of his year-long secret of trying to paint and confided to her his dream of one day being able to paint the moorland—lay beside him, and young man though he was, she thought his eyes were not quite dry.

She had sat silently by him, not knowing what to say and wondering why he so horribly minded the prospect of leaving the dale.

But he had minded, and only she knew, when Mr. Fleming's offer to take him into the bank came, how bitterly he dreaded the prospect of it.

"George seems quite pleased, in his quiet way," the Vicar told Miss Effie and Miss Flora. "Of course, any young man would enjoy a little town life," and Miss Effie agreed with him.

So George had gone, and, as his first Christmas holiday had been spent at Harrogate where his grandfather was taking a cure, and the summer before he had gone to Switzerland with Paul Fleming, his chief's delicate son, he had not been back to the dale since.

But now he was coming, and Cuckoo, spurred by the natural villainy of her eighteen years and much coaching by the experienced Rachel, had planned a fine holiday for him. George was to fall in love with her. It was not that she felt drawn towards the young man other than as to a very old friend, but there was a new frock for her in the unopened trunk, she was eighteen, and it behooved her to test her powers, and George was the only young man she knew.

Rachel, the summer before, had spent three weeks at Roseroofs, having, to Aunt Effie's indignation and Aunt Flora's gentle amusement, invited herself, and Rachel, now a young woman in her second social year, was full of wisdom and guile.

"It's the greatest fun," she said, "and as easy as any-

thing. They're all exactly alike, really, and you just have to keep them wondering. The thing is to keep 'em on the jump. *You* know—nice to them one day and hardly recognize them the next. And always," she added, with a touch of real wisdom in the midst of all her rubbish, "be interested in *their* things. Horses, or golf, or Japanese prints, or whatever it is they like."

"But what," inquired Miss Blundell, who was unusually well acquainted with herself, "about the things I like? Why shouldn't *they* be interested in *them?*"

"They will," Rachel answered, laughing, "after a bit. I meant just at first, you know."

Rachel had developed into a large, rather Junoesque young woman, with an occasional fleeting Phryne-like gleam in her prominent eyes. Abnormally lazy physically and mentally, sentimental, sensual, and unintelligent, she had a decided charm for some men and was neither unaware nor ashamed of its nature.

She was, among much affectation and many poses, genuinely fond of Cuckoo, and her advice as to the enslavement of George was quite kindly meant. "It's a pity there aren't any other men here," she said, simply; "but he'll be better than no one."

So it was decided that George's subjugation should be accomplished at Christmas, and Cuckoo had laid her plans in her own way, not altogether conforming to her friend's system.

A stranger, no doubt, would have been more fun, but then it was to be said for George that he would be on the spot, so George it should be. George would reach the Vicarage the next morning, and at seven the Vicar and he would be at Roseroofs, since, for more years than Cuckoo could remember, they had dined with the Misses Plues on Christmas Eve.

The new frock, Cuckoo knew, would be white, but it

would be a beauty, and she had secretly sent Aunt Marcia a new set of measurements, so it was sure to be long enough and, what was even more vital, tight enough in the waist. She wished Aunt Effie would come in.

And then she heard rapid footsteps on the gravel path and the opening of the front door.

"Oh, you're all snowy, Aunt Effie," the girl exclaimed, as the old woman put her parcels on the hall table, "isn't it awfully cold?" Aunt Effie was nipped and blue, but she declared that the storm was no more than what was seasonable.

She had, she pursued, as Cuckoo peeled off her soaking galoshes and Miss Flora carried her cloak to the kitchen to be dried, got everything they needed except the rum. "Not a drop of rum to be had in the whole village."

"Did you," Cuckoo asked, with grave slyness, "try *both* shops?"

"You always laugh at Warcop, Cuckoo," murmured Miss Flora, reproval in her voice, "and yet you've only been once to York."

"You forget my travels—my very extensive travels—in Spain and France," the girl replied, rising.

"Nonsense, child," Miss Effie's voice was sharp. "You can't remember when you were four."

Cuckoo stood, her hands stuck into her belt in a way her aunts disapproved, looking thoughtfully at the floor. "Of course I can't remember, Aunt Effie," she returned slowly, in her most guttural voice, "but somehow it isn't quite the same as if I had never been anywhere. I can't quite explain, but—somehow I seem to know how Paris feels and the South. I always expect the sun to go on growing hotter and hotter, and—it doesn't, you know. Also, I'm sure I know how orange blossoms smell, though there aren't any here,"——

Miss Effie gave a little snort that meant a conscientious

attempt to suffer fools patiently, and marched into the study. "We may as well open the box," she said, "before supper,"——

Esther Oughtenshaw was called from the kitchen to loosen the great strap with the travel-rusted buckle—"Budapest and Paris rain," Cuckoo reflected, watching her, and then the key was produced and the box opened.

On the top tray, as usual, lay several handsome, very slightly worn gowns of velvet and silk and cashmere, gowns of Lady Fabricius' sent for her sisters, and by Cuckoo irreverently called Tads.

After a very cursory examination of these offerings, the tray was lifted out and put on the floor. The next tray (the whole box smelt faintly of orris-root and camphor) was *the* one, for in it lay, in all its glory, Cuckoo's Christmas frock.

Miss Flora, as the three ladies bent over it and Miss Effie removed the tissue paper that covered it, gave a little scream of ecstasy.

"Oh, Effie," she cried, her eyes rolling recklessly, "it's crêpe-de-Chine!"

It was. And when Miss Effie lifted it in an almost sacramental manner and laid it on the sofa, it was seen to be very long. "Much longer than ever before," Miss Effie declared with disapproval, "although you haven't grown since last year, Nicoleta."

Nicoleta did not reply, and Miss Effie, after taking the tissue paper out of the sleeves, continued, this time in a voice full of horror, "Flora—look at the waist-belt!"

Miss Flora, palpitating, looked, as Miss Effie raised the garment, a finger hooked gingerly in either of the shoulders, the heavily ribbed silk inside the belt hanging down. "*Look* at it!"

Miss Flora rounded the belt with her hands. "She'll

never be able to get it on," she agreed. "Sarah Christie will have to let it out,"——

Cuckoo didn't smile. "I think," she said gravely, "that it will be all right, Aunt Flora."

She did not add that the revised measurements sent by her to Lady Fabricius had included a waist measure fully four inches smaller than her previous one. What would have been the use of mentioning it? She meant at any price to make her waist fit the frock and there was an end to it!

The ladies then turned their attention to the rest of the contents of the trunk. There was a pair of pointed, narrow, patent leather shoes with high heels, in each of which lay rolled a filmy black silk stocking—"Marcia has evidently forgotten," Miss Effie decided, examining the stockings, "the roughness of our roads. These things will be worn out at once——"

But Miss Flora protested. "Oh, Effie, she won't wear them for long walks! Only for best. She can wear them tomorrow when the Vicar comes. He will like to see her looking so nice!"

Busy though she was, investigating the mysteries of her frock, Cuckoo turned and kissed her Aunt Flora at this speech, and Miss Flora blushed, the caress was so unusual.

There were other gifts, a soft woolly shawl apiece for the ladies, a crimson woollen jersey for Esther Oughtenshaw, a dress length for Nellie, Agnes' successor, a fine collection of new novels that her sisters knew Lady Fabricius had bought and read and not cared to keep; there was a basket with a big pineapple in it, and a bottle apiece of preserved peaches and candied cherries (the latter for the Vicar), and there were beautiful new silk petticoats, one gray and one dark blue, stiff with richness and pipings, for Miss Effie and Miss Flora. And when

all these treasures had been inspected, Miss Effie found, amongst the packing paper, a long parcel, addressed in a strange hand: "For my Cousin Cuckoo, from Bertie."

Cuckoo opened the parcel to find, in a robin's-egg blue satin box, a beautiful ostrich feather fan mounted in pale tortoise-shell.

"Bertie! Dear me, how charming, how kind of him," murmured Miss Flora. "*What* a kind thought!"

Miss Effie nodded grimly. "The first time he has ever remembered the existence of any one of us."

"He could hardly have remembered us," came in gentle protest from Miss Flora, "considering that he never saw us."

Cuckoo said nothing. She stood in the firelight, opening and shutting her fan with a feeling of luxury hitherto unrealized by her. It was, in fact, the first object of utter, glorious, useless extravagance that she had ever owned, and silently, dreamily, and sensuously she was enjoying it.

All the evening she kept the fan near her. It was to her not only a very beautiful and enchanting fan, it seemed in some way to be a symbol. Why should her unknown Cousin Hubert Fabricius send her, he who had never in all his life seen her, such a fan? A fan of glorious white feathers is a full-dress thing; a thing no one could expect to be used in a small, lonely house on a remote hillside. Why had Bertie, if he wished to send her a gift, not chosen one of the things usually considered appropriate to young girls in her circumstances? Books, or a muff, or even a little brooch such as girls can wear anywhere?

This great flamboyant thing could never be used in Wiskedale. It could be carried only—Cuckoo held her breath in her corner of the dining-room, as her aunts played their game of bézique by the fire—only at balls. And when was there to be a ball in Wiskedale?

She was, as she sat there, the fan on her lap, very near the solution of the mystery, very near discovering the secret that had been kept so faithfully by the two old ladies, the fact that she was to go to London, that very coming May, to be presented and to go to balls.

So nearly had Bertie Fabricius' careless impulse been to letting the cat out of the bag, that Cuckoo, sitting there in the quiet room, was almost on the point of the great discovery, but just as Miss Effie and Miss Flora's rubber ended by a triumphant sequence on Miss Flora's part, something happened, and in five minutes more the fan and all its mysteries were forgotten.

CHAPTER XI

CUCKOO and George Loxley had been to all intents and purposes brother and sister since she was four and he nine. They had played together, eaten together, even tried, at one period, to learn together.

And as they grew older, though their intimacy had waned, it was but the waning of an intimacy between a boy who was unusually thoughtful and studious and a little sister whose babyish interests he was outgrowing. They had remained just as fond of each other as ever, but their ways had inevitably divided. George's shy passion for painting had helped to set them apart, for Cuckoo's chatter disturbed him at his work, and his sitting still for hours set her restlessness raging.

And despite the fact that George remained, as time went on, the only youth and young man in the countryside, it never occurred to Cuckoo to regard him as a possible lover or husband. He was, as he had always been, just George.

Finally when, goaded by Rachel and her stories, Cuckoo decided that someone must fall in love with her, she decided on George as her victim with a feeling of regret, not because George might possibly suffer, but because he was only just George!

A new young man would have been much more amusing, but—there was no new young man.

So George was to love her and to suffer damnably—her own word. His was to be a world-shaking passion, but she was to remain merely the detached and entertained object of his flame. The flame was not to have

the power even to scorch her asbestos personality. Rachel had had one lover whose mind had on one occasion gone to the length of turning to thoughts of suicide. She had had another who had chucked up a perfectly ripping job in Egypt to return to London to the devastating presence of his Beloved.

Therefore it followed naturally that Cuckoo might eventually have to wrench from George's frenzied hand the pistol with which he wished to put an end to his miserable life.

Knowing the young man as she did, Cuckoo rather doubted that this vision would ever be fulfilled—it seemed, considering George's gentleness, almost too good to be true—however, buttressed by Rachel's tales, she hoped for the best.

It would be great fun to see George cry, anyway, and that did not seem so utterly beyond the borders of possibility.

She had spent many hours over this pleasant dream of havoc and despair, and when, as she sat thinking of her fan, she heard George's voice in the hall, it flashed into her mind as a beautiful whole. She had not expected him till the next day, but he was here, and she would begin at once to enthral him. Her heart beat as she rose, and waited for the trial to begin.

"Oh, Master George," Esther Oughtenshaw was saying —and then the door opened and he came in.

He kissed Aunt Effie and Aunt Flora—he had always called them Aunt—and then turned to Cuckoo.

"Hello, Kiddy," he said, smiling at her and shaking her hand.

Cuckoo drew a deep breath that hurt her. "How do you do, George," she faltered. "I—I didn't know you had a mustache. . . ."

Christmas Day, that year in Wiskedale, outdid itself

in the matter of weather. It was snowy but clear; cold but wind-still; glittering but not dazzling. It was, Cuckoo reflected during the sermon, her eyes fixed unseeingly on the Vicar, the most perfect Christmas she had ever had. The Vicar, who possessed the rare and very beautiful priestly quality of leaving his familiar every-dayness behind him when he went to church, preached a short, simple, helpful sermon, his rosy old face grave and noble, his voice full of happy solemnity.

Miss Flora and Miss Effie and Cuckoo, all wearing new furs, sat in a row on the right of the church, and in the Vicarage pew next old Mrs. Bridlegoose, was George, full in the rich light that fell from the one old colored window that had survived the years. George was very happy that morning.

He loved his grandfather, and he also, as he himself mentally put it, loved the Vicar of Widdybank. They were to him two quite distinct people. He was proud of the fine, simple old cleric and he appreciated the beauty and wisdom of the sermon.

"And now, in the name of the Father and the Son. . . ."

The Roseroofs ladies had for many years dined on Christmas Day at the Vicarage, but before dinner George and Cuckoo climbed the hill and went to the Green Bench to see how the Roofs were looking.

They were both a little silent as they climbed the path in single file, and when George had brushed four inches of powdery, dry snow from the Bench, they sat down and they were still for a while longer.

The scene below them was one of almost incomparable beauty. Boys and girls skating on the tangle of ice among the three bridges at Warcop brought to the widespread whiteness splashes and blots of warm reds and blues; the fir trees up Cotherside glittered like so many silver-powdered Christmas trees, and the sky was

of the deep, unbroken blue so beautiful in winter and so inferior to cloud-swept spaces when the world is green.

And just below, the lovely old convoluted, rose-colored roofs, their outlines blurred by little drifts and wreaths of snow, lay like a bouquet of roses.

Presently George, wondering a little at Cuckoo's silence, turned and looked at her.

She wore a new brown coat and skirt—her gift from the Aunts—and her new musquash furs, the Vicar's offering.

She had not heard him move and was staring off up Cotherside with fixed eyes. George looked at her intently. She was not beautiful; her eyes were even yet too small, her skin too brown, her little underhung jaw too protruding.

But he loved the bluish mist that made her black eyes unlike all the other black eyes in the world and he loved her one dimple; a dimple that plainly owed its existence to the slight asymmetry of her jaw. And the glorious scarlet of her lips, he decided, any one must love.

"I must paint you, Nicky," he burst out suddenly.

"Do you still paint?"

It seemed very odd to him that she should not realize how he loved his poor little attempts at the most noble art, and he laughed tenderly at her. "Do I paint? Do I breathe?"

Then he added, gravely, "Ah, yes, I do—in a way. Rather badly, I know, but still—I've had lessons in Glasgow and I'm better than I used to be. Will you sit to me?"

"If you like," she answered indifferently, and a new, sudden, surprising fear came to him, the fear that he might bore her.

"Perhaps—perhaps you don't like painting, Cuckoo?" His voice, coming after a pause, was deprecating.

She sat very primly, her eyes fixed on the roofs. "Oh, yes," she said, "I do. Well enough."

She had changed very much, he thought, during his two years' absence. She was reserved, almost constrained, and she seemed, this Cuckoo who in the old days had been so like a little boy, to be intensely, almost painfully feminine.

He looked at one of her narrow little hands that lay basking in the sun on her muff, and an absurd feeling of pity rushed over him. It was so small a hand, so thin, so delicate-looking. He longed to cover it up, to put it back into the muff. . . .

He wished, with the same almost unendurable acuteness, that her dear little sloe-eyes were larger; other women's eyes were larger, and brutes and fools must admire her the less because hers were small. Her dear little eyes with the bluish mist in them!

Again, if she were only taller! He had friends, even he, the reserved old "cat that walked by itself," as they called him, young men who talked much about women; and he had learned, indifferent listener though they had found him, that, in the abstract, all men admire tall women. Only a man who happens really to love some particular small woman, he knew, ever admires shortness. *Then*, he was aware, the beloved at once became a pocket Venus, or "just as tall as my heart," or was compared to the greatest treasures in the world, to pearls, diamonds, violets, small, priceless things.

So as they sat there on the Green Bench in their unusual word-scarceness, George wished that Cuckoo were taller, wished it with a strength that drew the color from his thin cheeks and caused his quiet heart to quicken a little.

At last she spoke. "You sang beautifully, George," she said. "In church, I mean."

He laughed. "My voice is not much good. I suppose it's because I'm such a crock, but it's a pity, isn't it?"

"You *aren't* a crock. I hate the word," she returned quickly, "and it sounded beautiful."

After a moment she went on, "Do you remember singing 'Hark, hark, my soul,' at Father's funeral?"

"Yes."

"Sir Peregrine Janeways cried."

"Did he?"

"Do you know him, George? Since you've grown up, I mean."

He shook his head. "No, I've never seen him from that day. Why?"

"I don't know. Rachel knows him, and she's told me about him. He's a queer old thing, I should think, like one of the Regency beaux, or something."

"Rather like Grammont. Somebody painted him a while ago. I forget who—I saw it at the Academy. He's a magnificent-looking fellow——"

She nodded. "He's been in the divorce-court three times—rather the modern equivalent for tournaments, isn't it—and married two of the women."

George frowned a little. He wished she didn't know about such ugly things. "Shall we start back?" he asked, "it will be pretty slippery going down the hill, you know——"

Cuckoo was quite willing to go, but for some reason she clung to Sir Peregrine as a subject of conversation, and as he followed her down the narrow path, George learned that Sir Peregrine was like a man in a novel; very fascinating and dangerous; that no woman could resist him; that even now he was always in love with some one——

"I see," George muttered at intervals. As they crossed the brook by the stepping-stones, he changed the subject

by main force. "You haven't forgotten our promise to go to see Nurse this afternoon?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she answered readily, but her volubility had ceased, and the rest of their way to the Vicarage was made in almost unbroken silence.

In the drawing-room they found Miss Effie and Miss Flora in all the glory of their best gowns (made-over Tads of Aunt Marcia's from last year's Box), sitting by the fire. Miss Flora, in silver-gray silk with long lace frills at her wrists, wore that day, for the first time in her life, a cap—a strip of beautiful lace folded straitly across her abundant gray hair and pinned down by two small swallows of silver studded with minute diamonds.

George glanced at her with a flush of pleasure in his large eyes; she was quite lovely. Miss Effie, in violet silk, of a thick and rich quality but exactly the wrong shade for her lined and darkly-yellow face, wore her uncompromising hair plastered down as usual, and as usual apparently varnished.

The Vicar, much rounder, and quite as rubicund as ever, stood on the hearth-rug, his hands behind his back.

"Mrs. Baker from the Post Office has just been in," he declared when he had kissed Cuckoo, "to bring a—a—something that was forgotten this morning. Guess what it is?"

Proudly he produced a large, square silver frame and, smiling from it, a new photograph of Rachel Poole.

"It's *mine*, George," he teased, "but you may look at it!"

George and Cuckoo looked at it together.

Rachel wore evening dress, her long, smooth shoulders already a little matronly above the wonderful satin gown. Her hair was parted and rolled back in waves and twisted into a long Greek knot, and her long, rather too fat arms hung straight by her sides.

Hers was the undeniable, over-ripe, heavy-jawed beauty of many well-born English girls.

"Oh," Cuckoo cried, "isn't she—splendid! Isn't she lovely!" Then she added with genuine spite, "Her chin's going to be double soon!"

The three elders laughed, and the Vicar accused her of envy and blackheartedness, but George walked quickly out of the door and up to his room and sat down on the bed. For the moment his gentle soul was in an uproar. He hated Rachel because she was tall and fair and curved and soft, because Cuckoo was short and dark and angular and thin. Poor, little unbeautiful Cuckoo, how he wanted her to be beautiful, and beautifully-dressed and triumphant, and admired! He so wanted it that he dug his nails into his palms and ground his teeth aloud. "Poor, poor little dark thing," he thought. And thus it was that quite suddenly, with no preliminary warning of any kind, he knew he loved Cuckoo.

In this matter Cuckoo had the advantage, if it were an advantage, of having known, since the moment he came into the Roseroofs' dining-room two evenings before to break into her musings over the fire, that she loved him. It came to her in a kind of delicious, humble weakness. She, the strong, the pig-headed, the unaffectionate, wanted to wait on George, to serve him. She would have liked to be so small and light that he could carry her in his arms; she wanted to cry and have him dry her tears; she wanted to be stupid and have him laugh at her in his gentle way; she wanted to smooth his dear, mouse-colored hair, and kiss his large, white eyelids.

And although there was in her feeling none of the wildness she had been taught by books and by the lavishly-informed Rachel to expect, she never for a moment doubted its nature. It was love; her kind of love, and she knew it.

She sat in her little room that night for a long time, thinking. Her plan of enthralling and torturing George now looked to her like criminal lunacy. Rachel, it was clear, did not know!

Dear George, sweet George, what a love he was, with his vague eyes and his baby mustache like a blessed little brown caterpillar!

She had gone to sleep perfectly, unquestioningly happy, and the next day had been almost as blissful.

Because of her fears lest the new frock might prove *too* beautiful, too entrancing, and thus give George one pang, she very nearly did not wear it, but in the end she did, and the dinner-party was the most exquisite dinner-party that had ever been given.

So, all Christmas Eve and all Christmas morning, Cuckoo and George were as happy as, at their lovely ages, they deserved to be. Cuckoo had not as yet begun to think, and George did not know.

During dinner the young man wondered at a variety of things, but when, at about three, he and Cuckoo started up over the Edge to Clavers where old Mary Watlass, George's faithful and still-loving nurse lived, the delight of the prospective walk and the beauty of the afternoon filled her mind to the exclusion of every lesser thought.

The Vicar, Miss Effie, and Miss Flora watched the two young things from the window, as they went out of the garden and down towards the stepping-stones. "George doesn't look too strong, Vicar," Miss Effie said, as they stood there. "He is too narrow across the chest to please me,"——

"Yes, he is. But he's fatter, and Fleming treats him as if he were his own son. He is very fortunate in having such a chief, as he calls it,——"

"He seems to like Cuckoo," Miss Flora observed, absently.

"Flora Plues! What *do* you mean?"

Miss Flora glanced at her sister. "I mean just what I—*didn't* mean to say it out loud, Effie,"——

The Vicar, who had gone back to the fire and was rather noisily putting on coals, did not hear them, and Miss Effie went on, "If I thought there was any danger of—of *that*, I'd write to Marcia to send for her now, at once, instead of waiting till the spring," she declared.

Miss Flora fixed her violet eyes, the eyes so usually wandering in a vague way, suddenly steadfast on her sister's perturbed face.

"If you mean any danger of Cuckoo's marrying George," she said, quietly, "you need not be troubled, Effie. Cuckoo has plans of her own—plans that do not include marrying a poor man."

Miss Effie was a little annoyed at her sister's thus turning character-interpreter, a rôle she regarded exclusively as her own.

"So she's been confiding in you, has she?" she returned. "Did she also tell you why she didn't pick up your spectacles last night after dinner?"

"Why she didn't pick up——" began Miss Flora vaguely.

"Because she *couldn't*," Miss Effie interrupted her in triumph that was tinged, as so much triumph is, with malice. "That frock was so tight she could hardly breathe. She *dared* not stoop!"

"Oh, Effie!"

"Yes, oh, Effie. It's a good thing 'oh, Effie' isn't so blind as some other people, or nothing would ever be noticed!"

With her springless step, Miss Effie went back to the fire, and Miss Flora stood a little longer by the window,

her eyes filled with a queer, half-pitying, half-pained look.

George's former nurse, old Mary Watlass, lived in a tiny stone cottage in the outskirts of Clavers, a dale village so irregular, so scattered, that each of its wide-set cottages seemed to be on the edge of it.

It was one o'clock by the time Cuckoo and George arrived at her door, and the old woman was waiting for them, dressed in her best. Her dinner was in the oven, and she had made a special kind of suet-pudding which she believed George to love, for the reason that when, in his childhood, it had been prescribed for him because of its fattening qualities, he had unmurmuringly partaken of it.

She was a vast, clean old woman who seemed to have lost her original solidity of form; Cuckoo was struck with the idea that she seemed to be thawing, so shapeless and fluid her contours had become; she was, it appeared, overflowing her natural boundaries. Her welcome of the two young people was loud and voluble, and her delight over the gifts they had brought her gave them the truest kind of pleasure.

During the two years of his absence, George had naturally changed, and the old woman's admiration for his improved appearance put him literally to the blush.

"Oh, no, Mary," he protested, laughing, as she insisted on unwinding the silk muffler Miss Flora had knitted for him, "I really am *not* a handsome young gentleman, am I, Cuckoo?"

Cuckoo, as she agreed with him, wondered if they could possibly guess how heavenly he looked to *her*.

The little kitchen, though it may not have been of the marvellous tidiness of those whose owners had had the good fortune to be born in Yorkshire, was yet very pleas-

ant, and its owner's southern nature was signalized by a number of small, unnecessary luxuries that it contained.

There was not a single wooden-seated chair in the room and Cuckoo, with an irresistible inward grin, remembered an old story of the Vicar's: how Benjie Brigworthy had once been heard to say, in the early days of Mary's life at the Vicarage, that yon young woman from t'south seemed to think, the way she scolded about the hard chairs, that southern hindquarters were more delikit than northern ones.

The sofa was covered with chintz, and, as Cuckoo whispered to George while Mary was in the larder, you could stick on it without being nailed. The roast beef was tough, as most of the dale beef was, but old Mary couldn't, she explained, abide mutton on Christmas Day; there were roast potatoes and onions boiled in milk, besides the suet-pudding. It was a merry little party, Cuckoo and their hostess, in their gaiety, almost covering George's comparative silence.

George, for his part, hardly knew what he was eating until he came to the pudding, which he loathed, for he was filled with an almost aching sense of the beauty of Cuckoo's evident fear of meeting his eyes. The little love, to be so adorably shy!

If Cuckoo was shy she did not know it. She was very happy, in an utterly unquestioning way, and the old woman's reminiscences of George's babyhood and childhood were to her of an incomparable interest.

"I'll show you the picture we had took of 'im in them purple velvet trousers," Mary said at the end of the meal. "He had just learnt to spit, and was very proud of it, and spat on the floor at the photographer's——"

"Oh, George," murmured Cuckoo. . . .

The album was a large, brown volume of heavily gilt, corrugated leather. Its edges were apparently of solid

gold; it positively smelt of expensiveness, and had been, Mrs. Watlass almost unnecessarily explained, given to her on the occasion of her silver wedding. Sitting between the two young people on the sofa so miraculously unslippery, the old woman exhibited her picture gallery.

First, in the place of honor, a wreath of vivid forget-me-nots engarlanding him, the Vicar, in the preposterous clothes of the early 'seventies. The Vicar, who had probably never leant on a broken pillar in his life—after all, very few people have—was depicted not only leaning on one, in obviously new clothes, but also as smelling a rose.

George and Cuckoo shouted irreverently over this masterpiece, but Cuckoo melted into an agony of tenderness over the next: George aged two months—and such very short months, Cuckoo thought, they looked to have been—"Your poor mamma gave it to me, Master George," old Mary explained, "just before she died." George, lying on a heavily-embroidered pillow, his sparrow-like legs waving incoherently, his eyes fixed in a terrific squint. The pathos of this portrait nearly killed Cuckoo, though she gave a loud laugh at it, but George thought shame of his infant self and drew her attention to a pretty picture of his father and mother, arm-in-arm, contemplating a very ruinous abbey.

There were other photographs; photographs of Mrs. Watlass' first mistress and her baby; of her brothers and sisters; of her friends; all of them, apparently, attired in the same clothes.

Then, more Georges. George at three, in plaid trousers and a braided velvet jacket; George at eight as a Highland chieftain; George at ten, with too short sleeves and village boots.

"That," Cuckoo said gently, pointing to the last, "is the way I first remember you,"——

And finally came the picture that broke the dream and

caused the trouble. George had reached round his nurse's enormously broad back and found Cuckoo's hand. Very gently he held it, so that she might, if she chose, pretend not to know where it was; and hers was as limp as she could make it, but she was conscious of his touch almost to a painful degree and her eyes were, if not actually wet, yet not quite dry, as she bent over the album.

"Oh, what a handsome young man," she exclaimed suddenly, and it was with marked dryness that the old woman replied, "Yes, Miss Cuckoo, he was 'andsome, was Neddy Watlass."

"Any—any relation of yours, Nurse?" George asked with an effort (Cuckoo's hand was so *much* more important!)

The fat old woman gave a sudden snort, oddly at variance with her so invariably placid exterior. "Well, I don't know, Master George, if he's any *relation*," she answered, "but he's my husband."

"Good gracious, Nurse! I—I didn't know you had a husband. Do you mean that he's still alive?"

Mrs. Watlass nodded with dignity. "Oh, yes—so far as I know he's alive," she returned.

And after a little coaxing she told them her story; how, when she was twenty-one, she had come from Sussex with her mistress to visit Mrs. Saltburn of Clavers Hall —"I was nurse to little Miss Julia—she died long ago, poor little darling—and I met Neddy Watlass here. He had no money, and no more had I, but we were two fools and thought that didn't matter. Mrs. Lane, my lady, gave us twenty pounds, and Mrs. Saltburn let us have this cottage for four pounds a year; Ned was only a farm-laborer, Miss Cuckoo, though he never looked it. So we were married. And then my last baby died—we'd been married many years before she came, and the three boys had all gone while they were small—her name was

Gladys, for Mrs. Lane—and the Vicar came and fetched me for you, Master George—and that's all,"——

The old woman's voice trailed away into silence, and the ticking of the tall clock grew very loud and then faded to its normal note.

"But," Cuckoo asked, in a dull, slow way, "what—what happened, Nurse? Was he—was he bad to you?"

"Bad? Not him!" Mrs. Watlass rose and closed the album with a bang. "It was the worry that spoilt it all. The babies coming, and nothing for them, and then the doctor's bills, and the funerals—funerals are dreadful dear things, Miss Cuckoo. No, poor Ned was never a bad man and he loved his 'ome, but the trouble was too much for him. It was just being so poor, that's what it was,"——

Cuckoo had drawn her hand from George's and sat looking straight before her. Poverty! Poverty had ruined even this simple peasant-woman's life; what, she thought, would it do to hers, Cuckoo's? In an instantaneous vision she saw her coming years marching towards her, and she knew that they must not come in shabbiness and sordid misery. She had been a fool; she had forgotten, but now she remembered.

She rose and walked to the window. "It's beginning to snow, George," she said gently, "we had better be going,"——

The young man saw the change that had come over her face, and it hurt and dismayed him, but he could not read it.

They said good-bye to their old kind hostess and went out into the gray afternoon.

"It's too cold," Cuckoo declared, in a hard, business-like voice, "to go home by Laverock, we'd better stick to the road and cut down through Cold Comfort,"——

There was something in her manner that prevented his

asking her why she was so different, as he mentally put it. Heartsore and puzzled, he accepted her mood, and almost in silence they met the oncoming storm.

In the midst of the great gash in the earth that was Cold Comfort lead mine, Cuckoo stopped in the shelter of a heap of stones and waste, to pin her hat more securely.

"Have you a headache, Kiddy?" he asked in a voice almost to be stigmatized as one of humility.

She laughed. "No. The room was stuffy, that's all. And then—it made me angry to think of poor old Mary's having been such a fool"——

He did not, in his simplicity, understand, and because he was not vitally interested in old Mary, he did not ask what she meant. The gray, windy world was out of joint, that was all he knew; and it was more than enough.

In unbroken silence they went down the hill.

CHAPTER XII

ALL the next day Cuckoo stayed in bed. She had, she said, a bad cold. Not a sore throat, so Aunt Effie need not get the tannin gargle, and not fever, so Aunt Flora needn't get her a draught; she just had a cold and was going to stay in bed. The old ladies were alarmed, for Cuckoo was never ill, and hadn't stayed in bed more than ten days altogether since she came to Roseroofs fourteen years before. Miss Effie and Miss Flora sent for Esther Oughtenshaw and consulted with her. Esther thought it was wet feet.

"Miss Coocoo didn't ought to go rampaging all over the country in the deep snow," she said, shaking her head.

Miss Effie wanted to send Nelly for Dr. Dawes, but Miss Flora persuaded her not to.

"It would be nonsense," Miss Flora said gently; "it's a dreadful day, and you know how bad his rheumatism is,"——

Miss Effie looked at her sternly.

"The truth is, Flora," she said, "you are too easy with the child. If she's ill enough to stay in bed, she's ill enough to see a doctor and take whatever he gives her." (Dr. Dawes was deservedly famous for the nastiness of his draughts.)

Miss Flora smiled. "I know I'm not so sharp and clever as you, dear Effie," she said, and Miss Effie was pacified, and dropped the question of the doctor.

George Loxley came after lunch and asked for Cuckoo. He looked pale and owned to a sleepless night, and Miss

Flora with her own hands made him an egg-nogg which he swallowed bravely, though he happened to loathe nutmeg; but though he stayed two hours Cuckoo did not appear.

Miss Effie went up twice and declared the child to be sound asleep, and finally George asked Miss Flora to go.

"You—she can't be asleep all this time, Miss Flora," he begged, "and—just let her know how much I want to see her. I have to go back tomorrow afternoon, you know."

Miss Flora went, and came back in a moment.

"I spoke to her twice," she said, "and she didn't answer, so I suppose——"

George's short-sighted eyes studied her intently.

"Do you think——" he began, when Miss Effie came in and Miss Flora turned to her.

"*You* thought she was asleep, didn't you, Effie?"

"She *was* asleep. She was even," Miss Effie answered, with delicate confusion, "h'm! snoring a little—*just* a little!"

Miss Flora fluttered her hands and turned to George in some triumph. "You see! Effie is the clever one, and she would be sure to know,"——

"Not clever, Flora," protested Miss Effie modestly. "It's only that you were always too—too poetic, too kind-hearted, to see into things much; but the child *is* asleep. That is certain."

George went away disconsolate.

He was very unhappy, and even the Vicar saw it and asked the reason. The truthful George of course lied, as anyone would have done in such circumstances. He said he had a headache, and then a little later he forgot and said he had a sore throat. Luckily the Vicar, like Miss Flora, was not a close observer and went on peacefully with his reading, after suggesting George's going early

to bed and taking a glass of rum and water, hot. Meantime, all the interminable hours of the day, Cuckoo had lain in her bed, fighting her first fight.

How she had been so stupid as to forget, she declared over and over again, she could not imagine. All her life (and very long those eighteen years looked to her) she had dreamt of one day "having things." But for the firmness of her belief in this some day when she was to have all and more than Rachel had, how could she have borne to see Rachel's belongings? If she had not known that she herself was one day to travel, how could she have borne Aunt Marcia's label-covered boxes? If she had not known that *people* were one day to be hers, how could she have endured the loneliness of the dales?

The Aunts had admired her for her patience, she knew; thought her wonderful not to repine, not to be bored with the unbroken dullness of Roseroofs. And oh, what a repining would have been hers were it not that all along she had known that one day she, Cuckoo, was to have everything!

And now she had gone and fallen in love with George! With George Loxley! Only George!

It seemed to her that she could have forgiven her own folly if the menace to her future, the occasion of her blithering idiocy, had been a stranger. If he had been a genius, however poor; or divinely handsome; or even a younger version of the ancient heart-breaker, Sir Peregrine Janeways; but *George!* George, whom she had known since she was a baby; who was gentle; and a bookworm; and a bank clerk; and short-sighted; and narrow-chested. George, who painted badly, and had to take care of his digestion, and mind not to get his feet wet! The girl actually writhed in her agony of rage over her own weakness. What *could* it be in George that made her go all to pieces and want to put both her arms round him and

take care of him? His ugly, mousy hair looked beautiful to her, though she knew it wasn't; and his long, delicate nose, the end of which sometimes quivered like a rabbit's—it was an absurd nose! But the absurdity of George's nose was of no real help to the girl, and his inability to digest pork in any form, once a source of scornful mirth to her, became, that wintry afternoon, a pathetic, almost a winning quality. She lay as still as a mouse when her aunts came and peeped at her, and, as has been said, on one occasion she snored.

She knew George was downstairs; George the Destroyer, no, George the would-be Destroyer; and she would not see him.

Before she went to sleep that night she had vowed a vow. She knew that George must leave Warcop by the four o'clock bus for Middleton, and she vowed to herself that she would rise early and walk over and spend the day at Thornby Lodge with old Judge Capel. She disliked Judge Capel, a gouty recluse with a red-hot temper, but at Thornby Lodge she would be safe from George.

And immediately after breakfast she set out, despite Miss Effie's and Miss Flora's surprise at her announcement of what she was going to do and Miss Effie's reminder that it was poor George's last day. Cuckoo shrugged her shoulders. "I must have a walk. I need it. Give George my love, and say good-bye for me," she added steadily, helping herself lavishly to marmalade.

Miss Flora pushed another little glass pot towards her. "That's marmalade, dear," she said, "*this* is the black currant——"

The look that Cuckoo flashed at Miss Flora was not amiable, but no more was said, and a little later Cuckoo was on her way to Warcop, beyond which, up Cotherside, Thornby Lodge lay, a yellowish block in the snow.

Judge Capel, whose wife had brought the Lodge to him as part of her marriage portion, loathed the North and Northern people. He was a crabbed, discontented old failure of a man, who was gnawed by a feeling that he had never been properly valued, either as a man or a lawyer.

He detested his heir, who was a clergyman in Cumberland, and his only friends were two poor old sisters, cousins, who visited him occasionally out of a badly-disguised sense of duty; and old Dr. Dawes, who, when occasion arose, was quite capable of out-bullying the old bully, and who, furthermore, possessed the gift of mobility and invariably ended their quarrels by marching out, leaving his worsted adversary to what he knew would be three or four weeks' deprivation of any male society.

Cuckoo sat with the old man for several hours and lunched alone in the big dining-room, which he never used in the winter. She was strangely unhappy, and her little face looked so white and wan that Jebbs, the old butler, insisted on her having a glass of sherry and water. After lunch Judge Capel proposed a game of picquet, but the game came to a sudden end, for her uncontrollable distraction caused him to lose all patience with her, and he burst out, as nearly swearing at her as even rheumatoid arthritis often leads a man to swear at any woman not his own wife.

She rose. "I'm going now," she said, putting the card-table to one side and holding out her hand.

"No, no, Cuckoo—don't be so ridiculously hasty."

"I must go. Good-bye."

He apologized, but she would not stay, though she no longer cared what he called her. It was simply that she *must* get out into the air and walk.

When she got to the Lodge gates she stood for a moment looking at the view. Down at the foot of the hill

He dropped his portmanteau and held her close against his well-worn old coat.

lay Warcop, with its three bridges, the river sprawling like a dark snake in the snow, and beyond, off up to the right, just under the Edge, the little blot of trees that was Roseroofs. Off to her left, round the curve, Widdybank lay in a light haze, the church tower standing out among the naked trees; it was warmer, and the snow looked blue; it was going to thaw. And then suddenly, far up on the Middleton Road, between Watlass Mill and Canty Bridge, she saw a small yellow and black thing that moved. It was the bus coming from the twelve o'clock train and it was coming to take George away.

Suddenly the whole thing became monstrous, unbearable. She had been a wicked girl, a fool, an idiot. Nothing mattered. Not money, nor travel, nor jewels—nothing mattered but George. Only George mattered. Down the road she flew, racing for her life with the yellow bus. It was slippery, and as she reached the bottom it became more slippery. At Crowner Bridge (named after the battle of Corunna) she slipped and fell, hurting her elbow very badly, but she was up and off again before young Tom Graves could help her, and dashing up the hill to the little Green where the shops were.

Glancing up over her right shoulder just as she turned up the bend beyond which the Middleton Road would be out of sight, she took a last look up it. The coach had slowed up just before it got to St. Austin's Bridge. It could not be at the "Grouse" for another ten minutes and it always waited there fifteen before starting back. So she would catch George in the quiet of the path he was sure to take from the Vicarage, the path which joined the road just ahead of her. On she walked, breaking into an honest run when she had left the wood. She was out of breath and her elbow ached, but she did not care.

Nothing mattered but George.

Where the path, hitherto a closely-winding one, comes

out on the broad level just before Flaye Ghyll—it keeps in the open all the way to the churchyard—she stopped. But for the Ghyll she could see straight to the church, and George was nowhere in sight. She had missed him.

She waited to give him time to climb out of the Ghyll, if he had already got down into it, but he did not come. He must have driven, and been in some shop or at the "Grouse," when she passed!

He had gone, and she had missed him. At that moment Cuckoo Blundell, young as she was, knew despair—blinding, sickening despair. She turned slowly and limped back towards where the path met the steep tributary one leading to Roseroofs.

Her face was wan and looked oddly streaked, as if very white fingers had been pressed into its creamy-brown surface. Her eyes, though she did not know it, were dropping slow tears; her hands were clenched.

He had gone. George, *her* George, whom she loved, had gone.

And then quite suddenly he stood before her, his shabby portmanteau in his hand.

"Oh, George, George," she said. "I thought you'd gone, and—I wanted you so."

He dropped his portmanteau and held her close against his well-worn old coat. She could never remember what he said, nor what she said. She didn't know whether he kissed her or not, though he *did* know.

To her it was enough that his arms were round her and that the smell in her nostrils was his, the peaty, leathery, tobacco-y, very faintly eau-de-Cologne-y smell was his, and that nothing else mattered.

They stood under fir-trees, and as they stood, the melting snow began to slide off the branches, falling with soft plops.

"Oh, George, George," the girl went on, "sit down on that log a moment. What if I'd missed you?"

He obeyed her, and pulling off his cap she knelt by him and smoothed his hair with the palms of her hands.

"My little, little Doadie," she murmured, "and his darling rabbit nose, and his blessed moustache like a caterpillar." In a kind of frenzy of tenderness she kissed him repeatedly—softly, as she might have kissed a baby.

He let her do as she liked, and then he kissed and fondled her almost as gently, and quite as tenderly.

"My Kiddie, my own wicked little Cuckoo—thank God I found you. I'd been up at Roseroofs again, you know—for the third time."

Presently, hand in hand, they made their way back to the village.

"You will write to me, Cuckoo? You won't forget?"

"No. Oh, George, you don't know what a beast I've been. I wasn't ill yesterday, nor asleep,"——

He laughed gently. "I knew all the time. You were afraid."

It was so plain that he adored her for being afraid that she had not the heart to correct him.

They went into the quiet kitchen at the inn to avoid the two or three idlers that in Warcop constituted a crowd, and said good-bye there, old Charlotte, the cook, having gone for a look at the bus.

Very solemnly, feeling as if they stood not in a warm kitchen but on some shining height, they said good-bye, tears in their eyes.

"I shall be back in June," George said. "Mr. Fleming will surely give me a month."

Then he left her, standing by the great polished stove.

CHAPTER XIII

THE next morning the Vicar sent up to Miss Effie a note containing a letter from Lady Pelter.

Mrs. Bridlegoose has gone for her holiday, as usual [the Vicar wrote] and will not be back till January 15th. Elsie Baker does very well as a stop-gap for me, but she would not be able to make Rachel comfortable, so I thought I could not do better than send poor Blanche's letter to you, my dear Miss Effie——

Miss Effie read the two letters several times, her lips, out of which even the raspberry-color had of late years faded, squeezed into a wrinkled bunch.

Then she went to the door and called Miss Flora.

Miss Flora, who was making a particular kind of jelly for one of the Skelton children who had broken his leg skating at the three bridges on Christmas Eve, came tripping to the kitchen door.

"Yes, Effie?"

"I've just had a note from the Vicar that I'd like to read to you,"——

But Miss Flora's jelly had arrived at a critical point in its evolution, and as Esther Oughtenshaw had gone to Warcop and Nelly was busy upstairs, Miss Effie was forced to join her sister in the kitchen.

She sat down in the sun by the window where Esther Oughtenshaw's pink geranium displayed its glories, and drew a long breath.

"I hope the dear Vicar isn't ill, Effie?" Miss Flora

stood stirring the jelly over the fire, her long, thin body bent in an almost incredible curve as she drew back from the stove.

"No. Oh, no, he's not ill. A sore throat, he says, which"—Miss Effie added with an air of conscious villainy—"I suppose means some new book!"

"Oh, Effie!"

"Well, that doesn't concern us, Flora—and this letter from Lady Pelter apparently does, so I'll read it to you. 'My dear Arthur'—(it's from Planings, they're there for the winter)—'I am in great distress and really don't know what to do'—(I'll spare you the underlinings, Flora!)—'so, of course, I write to you, my dear brother-in-law.'"

"The dear Vicar," murmured Miss Flora.

"'We have been here ever since October,'" Miss Effie went on, unmoved by the apostrophe, "'and although it's the dullest place in the world, I have been quite happy until now, when the blow has fallen. What I have done to deserve such a——' Oh, bother," broke off Miss Effie, "what a blithering creature she is, to be sure! Let me see. Ah, yes, here it is—'And I have just found that Rachel is having a love-affair with a young man in the town, with the son of a doctor, if you please. Naturally, he hasn't a penny—two hundred a year, I believe, from his mother—but the silly child declares she is going to marry him!

"'His name, my dearest Arthur, is Jackson. Fancy my poor Charles's daughter going through life as Lady Rachel Jackson! Heaven knows I'm not'—etc., etc., but—well the long and short of it is, Flora," Miss Effie announced, laying down the letter, "she wants to send Rachel up here to be out of the way, and the Vicar can't have her because it's Emily Bridlegoose's yearly holiday and there's only Mrs. Baker the postmistress's

sixteen-year old Elsie—you know, the girl with the extraordinarily fat ankles?—to do the work—so that he wants us to take her in. Rachel, I mean."

Miss Flora poured the contents of her saucepan carefully into a mould.

"Well, what do you think, Flora?" Miss Effie's voice was sharp. "I suppose we must?"

"Of course, Effie. And Cuckoo will be delighted."

"Y-yes, and Cuckoo will soon put the Jackson business out of Rachel's head!" Miss Effie, at this thought, gave her own head a little satisfied nod. Miss Flora went to the stove and, drawing a jug of hot water from the boiler, disappeared into the scullery. Then, still without her having spoken, Miss Effie heard her washing her hands.

As time on, Miss Effie reflected, Flora seemed more and more disposed to let her sister make all the necessary decisions and plans of their lives. She grew less talkative too, and Miss Effie had decided, with a pang of pity, that dear Flora had finally learnt that hers, Miss Effie's, judgment, was better than her own.

Grim and dry as she was, Miss Effie loved her sister—whom she had not kissed since the day of Robert Blundell's death and although her vanity was pleased by her reading of Miss Flora's deferring to her, it led her to think that Flora's sweet old youthfulness was going; that her queer little gaiety, her fits of mirth that Miss Effie had formerly condemned as "silly" were becoming less and less frequent.

Miss Effie was sixty-seven, and Miss Flora sixty-nine, yet Miss Flora's gentler fibre had accustomed everyone to regard her as the younger of the two.

For a long time Miss Effie stood staring out at the winter morning through the green mesh of the geranium. She had realized for the first time, though she had long

since recognized, the fact that even poor Flora was now an old woman.

Old Age had come. It was as if Old Age were a person, long known to view and to-day, for the first time become acquainted with.

Yes, Flora and she were old.

And while Miss Flora fluttered and skimmed about the kitchen, singing a tuneless little song under her breath, her pretty hair, now nearly white, hanging in little loose tendrils round her warm brow, Miss Effie went through a moment of that horrid experience of watching a still happy person on whom some unsuspected blow is about to fall. Flora might not, possibly did not, know that she was old, and Miss Effie knew. It was dreadful, and Miss Effie's eyes, the irises of which looked like dulled tortoise-shell, burned as she listened to the poor little song and watched Miss Flora moving about.

Ought she, she wondered sincerely, to convey to Flora that at nine-and-sixty a woman is too old to skip and spring and glide and wave her hands in the air?

Before she had decided on this point, Miss Flora, in all innocence, gave one of her highest hops, as a pleasant thought struck her. "Poor Cuckoo," she exclaimed, "it will cheer her up to have Rachel. When can Rachel be here, Effie?"

"Poor Cuckoo? Why *poor* Cuckoo?" snapped Effie in her gruffest and most forbidding voice, "what is she poor about, with her two hundred a year and—and her youth?"

Miss Flora stood quite still for a moment in one of her absurd "poised for flight" attitudes, as Blundell had called them, her wide, lucent, loose-set eyes full of distress, and then—they never referred to the episode—her pink lips moving tremulously, she made a sort of soft dart at Miss Effie and kissed her.

Miss Effie never knew the reason of this kiss, and a moment after its bestowal she saw Miss Flora, in her old fur coat, apparently being blown up the path to the Green Bench.

Rachel Poole arrived two days later, accompanied, as usual, by the stupid but apparently faithful Jeanne, and the meeting between Rachel and Cuckoo had, Miss Flora noticed, a kind of high solemnity about it. It seemed less a meeting than a consecration.

And Miss Flora was right, for the young creatures were both appreciating and acting up to the full romance of the situation. Rachel was the mother-persecuted damsel of all drama, banished from her home to tear her heart from her lover, and Cuckoo was her friend, meant, at least by the oppressed one herself, to be confidante and sympathizer as well. Miss Blundell, despite her views about matrimony, was, perhaps because of George, fairly satisfactory in her new rôle, although she felt not the least need to exact similar tribute from Rachel. At the end of the third day—it was her first opportunity, for Rachel's volubility about herself was indefatigable—she told Rachel that she was going to marry George Loxley some day, but she invited no speculations about her future, and no raptures, so Rachel very soon gave up mentioning the subject.

Cuckoo was very queer, and, besides, Rachel's own affairs were infinitely the more interesting. So by the hour the two girls talked about Rachel and her enchanting troubles. They discussed Love, Alison Jackson (Rachel's Fate was named Alison), the disgusting mercenariness of Lady Pelter, the ease and gaiety with which a man and a woman—Rachel loved speaking of herself as a woman, but the term made Cuckoo shy—who truly loved each other could subsist on two-hundred

a year. These things and many other collateral ones they wore threadbare.

Cuckoo had throughout an uneasy feeling that, but for her subjection to that irresistible charm of George's, she would have sided in the matter with Lady Pelter, but there was no good in reminding the ecstatic Rachel of this.

They decided gravely that the law of entail was a most iniquitous thing, for was not Angus, Lord Pelter, in a few years to come into a property worth four thousand pounds a year?

They talked of Alison's Blue, of his delicious way of saying wevver for weather, ravver for rather, etc., and, in this Cuckoo as well as Rachel absolutely believed, of the sublime certainty that true Love can never die.

The moors, wind-swept and vast, beheld the two in their walks, their young heads nodding heavily with wisdom; the early-year sunshine on their dreams lent them something unforgettable.

Once they walked over to Clavers to see Mary Watlass, who had known Rachel as a baby and who made an admirable listener to the great story. While Rachel sat by the fire, conscientiously neglecting not the smallest detail as she poured out what she honestly considered her troubles, Cuckoo stole quietly out and wandered up the road along which she and George had made their way home on Christmas Day.

How sad she had been, how heavy—literally, materially heavy—her heart had been.

Just by that old hayrick, with its sail-cloth cover, George had looked at her with such troubled eyes!

Dear George. Her queer, one-sided little mouth curved into softness as she took his last letter from her pocket and read it while she walked. It is an odd thing that whereas all the romance of Rachel's difficulties appealed

to her strongly, she had none of the same feeling about her own engagement.

She had enjoyed the tale of how Rachel received Mr. Jackson's letters through the intermediary services of the Planings' housekeeper, but she was very glad that her own love-letters came to her without the smallest difficulty, owing to the fact that old Jimmy Bridlegoose, the postman, brought the Roseroofs' post only as far as the letter-box nailed to the may-tree under which poor Chris Greening had waited one morning for the present Mrs. Isaac Vosper.

It had always been Cuckoo's duty to go down by the kitchen-garden gate to the may-tree every morning at half-past nine, to open the box and bring up the letters.

The key of the box was fastened to the little curb bracelet given to her by the aunts on her sixteenth birthday.

So her daily letter from George had never been seen by anyone but herself.

His letters were inexpressibly dear to her; tender, proud little letters they were, full of trust and hope. She loved them something as she loved George himself, with an indescribable mixture of protectingness and pity.

And she saw with a kind of hushed feeling of amusement that George as strongly wanted to protect and shield her as she wanted to protect and shield him. He wrote about her thinness just as she wrote about his colds, and his indigestion; he spoke about his little love of the milky eyes exactly as she wrote about his blessed rabbit-nose. It was wonderful!

He called her his darling, bonny blessing, and she loved to be called his darling, bonny blessing. She was very happy.

George, of course, had been told about Mr. Jackson and had written Rachel a note of sympathy and encour-

agement, and in the last letter Cuckoo now re-read what her lover had suggested for the future. This wonderful idea was nothing less than that the young couples should settle in two neighboring cottages in a pleasant suburb, somewhere. For, and this was a great surprise, George had decided to devote himself to painting!

Hampstead Heath, he wrote, would be the place, of course, but Golder's Green could be made to do. He had sent for and studied prospectuses of the latter paradise, and wanted to know what Cuckoo thought of the plan?

He had, all told, nearly two hundred a year, and there was no doubt of their being, in a modest way, exceedingly comfortable on that sum. Also, he could see no reason for putting off their marriage. Mr. Fleming knew that he was going to give up his job at the bank and thoroughly sympathized with him. "He says lots of men can't stand the close confinement, and that Hampstead is nearly as good as Wiskedale——"

Dear George—what a darling he was, and what a baby! For Cuckoo, although her ambitious plans had been shattered by the force of her own youth, was by no means as easy about the future as George was.

Neither was she purified of all regrets for past dreams. She loved George, but she loved him against her will, and there were times when she wished that she had not caught him in her mad race back from Thornby Lodge that day.

If she had missed him, she had more than once told herself, she "would have been all right in a few days," and her old, well-considered dreams would in time have ripened.

That blowy afternoon, as she waited for Rachel to have done with old Mary, Cuckoo decided that she was just a little tired of Mr. Alison Jackson and that she did almost wish that she had not seen George again!

After all, there were in the world things beside Love. She knew, although George did not, that life in a London suburb on two hundred pounds a year would not be a life of ample pleasures and generous distractions. However, she sighed as Rachel, satiated with self-revelation, came out from the cottage; it couldn't be helped now; the mischief was done, and George was the sweetest, dearest thing in the whole world.

George did not write the next day, nor the next, and on Sunday, after church, the Vicar told the Roseroofs' ladies that his grandson had been ill.

"One of his very bad throats, I am afraid," the old man said with a sigh. "I wish he could be in a better climate—you know, his poor mother died of laryngal consumption——"

After lunch Cuckoo dragged the indolent Rachel over the Edge and across the High Moor to Flaye, where she roused the sleepy postmistress and wrote out a telegram to be sent the very moment the post-office was open on the Monday morning.

Cuckoo was nervous with the nervousness of a mother over an absent child who is ill. Her scarlet mouth, thinned and drawn, looked old; her eyes seemed to have shrunk back under her brows.

"It's only a sore throat," expostulated the ungratefully, but not unreasonably, bored Rachel. "Once Alison was thrown from his horse, and I had no news for twenty-four hours. You don't know what *that* was, Nicky—what I went through!"

"George is very delicate," returned Cuckoo shortly.

When the postmistress (she was a Skelton, and her mother had been a Greening) had promised several times to send the wire by 8.30 the next morning, and also, when the answer came, to send little David, her son, to bring it over and put it into the letter box—he was on *no* account

to bring it to the house on pain of losing his promised sixpence—the two girls walked back to Roseroofs. Rachel talked hard all the way, about Alison and his various illnesses and hair-breadth escapes, not ceasing at accomplished mishaps but venturing into the realms of speculation and wondering; for instance, what she should do if he ever had typhoid fever or lost a leg in a railway accident.

Cuckoo walked along in almost unbroken silence. More than ever, now that he was ill, did she love George. With a passion utterly unknown to her before, did she long to be physically near him. She wanted to hold him in her arms, to stroke that soft, wonderful hair of his, to give him his medicine, to give him broth and milk. . . .

"—In spite of all that they could say," Rachel was declaring dramatically, "I would. Nothing on earth could prevent me, the poor angel."

"Couldn't prevent you *what?*" snapped Cuckoo.

Rachel looked at her reproachfully. "I don't believe you've been listening to a word I said: marrying him if he was paralyzed and had to be pushed about in a bath-chair."

Cuckoo did not answer. She was counting the hours till she could have an answer to her wire, which in its cold phraseology: "Anxious, please wire here.—CUCKOO," was only half meant to deceive the friendly and humane Mrs. Skelton.

Monday afternoon, at their third visit to the may-tree, the little, longed-for, tangerine-colored envelope was found in the box. Cuckoo walked away from her companion and stood with her back turned while she read it.

Don't worry, darling—much better. Writing.—GEORGE.

"Idiot!" exclaimed Cuckoo, her voice sharp with anger.

"Good gracious, Nicky! What is it?"

" 'Darling!' To go and put 'darling' in a wire," Cuckoo answered, tearing the paper to bits and slipping it into her pocket. "Now everyone in Flaye will know, and everyone in Warcop, too. Mrs. Skelton was a Greening, and her daughter's husband, John Oughtenshaw, keeps the draper's shop at Warcop. Oh, the—the fool!"

Poor Rachel was aghast. Not thus did she treat her Alison's telegrams! And the worst was that she knew that Cuckoo was absolutely sincere in her scorn and anger.

"How *can* you say such awful things, Cuckoo Blundell?" she gasped. "I don't believe you love him at all. Alison——"

"Oh, bother Alison. I'm sick to death of Alison. He has no chin, anyhow. And I'm sick of George, and of you—and of myself, and everybody. Tell the Aunts I sha'n't be home for lunch, will you? I'm going for a tramp."

And off she sprinted (Rachel's word) up the hill, past the Bench, and onwards, leaving the bewildered and insulted Rachel staring after her. Cuckoo's thoughts as she walked—one might almost say flew—over the wet country-side, were difficult to analyze. She did love George Loxley, and her misery when he was ill had been nearly unendurable. Why then, now that he was well, should she be so angry? To be sure, their engagement was to be kept a secret until Easter, and Mrs. Skelton the postmistress was not only sworn to keep telegraph secrets, but a kind and worthy woman, and was not likely to give Cuckoo away.

Vaguely the girl felt her resentment was not wholly towards the unlucky word in the telegram: it lay deeper than that, and was directed towards herself as well. She was in a whirl of anger, not only because George had

called her darling in a telegram, but because her own misery over his illness had strained her nerves to breaking-point, and because she loathed being so weak as to be unable to bear with calmness the fact that anyone on earth had a sore throat!

Deeper than this, even, lay the roots of her mental condition. She resented, with the most unchildlike bitterness, the fact that this feeling for George should so utterly have upset her plans for the future. Her love was a weakness, not a strength; a disease, not a fine condition of soul. By the time she had skirted Flaye, made a big half-circle round Clavers, and was half-way up Laverock, her hurrying, impatient mind had nearly reached its goal, and when, after a big climb, too steep for any consecutive thought, she stood at the edge of an old lead mine, a rough hollow, filled with piles of stone and coarse gravelly soil, she sat down on a stone and waited for her breath and mental clarity to come to her. It was as if she had done a mental, as well as a steep physical, climb and as if she had only to wait for quiet breathing, to be able to see clearly that for which she had been struggling.

And she was right. Gradually, as her panting breath and hurrying brain slackened, she saw, clearly and well.

Below her lay Wiskedale, the beck in the middle; opposite lay Widdybank Bottom, with its great cluster of leafless trees; the church, Vicarage and village being hidden just beneath where she stood. Opposite her stretched Meldon Edge, across which, two hours before, she had walked. On to the right lay Warcop, in its tangle of river and bridges, and beyond the broad bend of the dale, Middleton.

She studied all the familiar landmarks for a few minutes and turned to her mind-scape.

She loved George Loxley, but it was against her interests and against her will to love him. And she wished

from the bottom of her heart that she didn't. It was a mistake; it was worse than a mistake: it was almost a betrayal of herself to have let herself go in such a senseless and ridiculous way. She hated herself for having done it. That, however, was now past, and George was away and going to stay away, and therein lay her salvation. She must for her own sake forget him and forget him she would.

After standing for a long time thus instinctively fortifying herself, she started homewards, her mouth firmly set, her brows drawn down in her old scowl of determination. She loved him, she could not help it, but she could and would refuse to let this weakness of hers ruin her life. It would be madness to marry him and she would not marry him. He must suffer, and she would suffer, but they must endure the pain. And the first thing to be done was to forget him.

She would begin at once.

CHAPTER XIV

THE next day it rained, and after lunch the four ladies settled down for an afternoon's work indoors. Miss Effie and Miss Flora, according to their custom, were shut each in her own room to do what they called "their private mending"; and the two girls were in the drawing-room, one on each side of the fire. They were, despite Cuckoo's rudeness the previous day, quite on their usual terms, for, on her return from her walk, Cuckoo had plainly shown that she had forgotten that she had given cause for offence, and Rachel was afraid to remind her of her outburst. Cuckoo was pale and looked very tired, but Miss Effie explained at dinner that the walk she had taken was enough to make a strong man weary, and no one said any more.

That morning the girls had a perfectly uneventful walk to Warcop, during which Rachel gradually trickled back to her talk about Alison, and Cuckoo listened with a sympathy that of late had been, Rachel considered, somewhat lacking.

Alison's letter that morning had been very delightful, full of quotations from Keats and Byron and Ella Wheeler Willcox and other great poets, so that even Cuckoo was impressed by it. She, too, had had a letter, a long letter Rachel knew, from George, but she had not communicated any of its contents to her friend, and Rachel had not bothered to ask questions. As a matter of fact, Rachel found George rather boring and Cuckoo's love-affair quite devoid of the delicious cloud of romance that overhung and enriched her own. Cuckoo had studied George's let-

ter very carefully, and despite her splendid resolutions of the evening before it had weakened her a little. There was something so touching, what she considered so child-like, in his absolute trust in her; she, knowing herself to be by no means so trustworthy in this matter as he believed, could not resist a rush of helpless tenderness towards him as she read. She was, moreover, thoroughly tired out and inclined for the moment to put thought aside and let matters take their own course. She knew, or thought she knew, that she was a fool to love George, and yet for that one afternoon she could not help loving him. So his letter was in her pocket as she went downstairs and joined Rachel, who was busy with a catalogue from Harrod's, marking with red ink a number of things she considered indispensable to her future home.

Cuckoo cast a disparaging eye over this list. She herself would hate buying pots and pans and brooms, and Rachel's monologue on the relative merits of two kinds of brass polish left her completely cold.

"Things like that," she declared, "ought not to cost money, they ought to grow on bushes. Bah! how detestable it is to be poor!"

However, a moment later she had settled to her darning, allowing her thoughts to drift to Glasgow without further resistance. She had made up her mind not to marry George, and she was not going to marry him, but just for this one afternoon, when she was so tired, she wouldn't worry. Suppose, after all, she was not to "have things"; suppose she was to do without things? Dear George! It is possible, although she did not suspect it and would have resented help from such a quarter, that the fact that the spoiled Rachel should be giving up her superior possibilities for the sake of a young man as poor as George Loxley, inclined her the less to face the necessity for giving George up. Rachel was a goose, but she

was a goose of title, a goose belonging to the highest of flocks, yet there was no doubt that luxurious and pampered as she had always been, she was marrying her poor man, not with Cuckoo's ceding to an irresistible force, but gladly, even proudly, and for this superiority Cuckoo did not love her the more.

Looking up from her stocking the younger girl studied Rachel's unconscious face. Rachel was darning her first stocking under her friend's guidance, and it was clear to Cuckoo's shrewd eyes that only theoretically was it a stocking of her own—that, so far as Rachel was concerned, it was in reality a sock of Mr. Jackson's. After a moment's reflection, Cuckoo decided that she herself might just as well try to believe that afternoon that she was darning George's socks, and enjoying darning them, and being, despite her wavering in the matter of her engagement, fundamentally a thorough-going, determined creature, she gave up the next few minutes to trying to emulate Rachel's mood of high romance. It was in the midst of this mood of emulation, when she had succeeded in conjuring up the feeling of inexpressible tenderness that was her culmination of love, that Nellie brought in the telegram. Cuckoo, with a flash of terror lest her indiscreet lover should have gone and wired "darling," or even worse, direct to Warcop, half started out of her seat and held out her hand. Nellie shook her head.

"Not for you, Miss Cuckoo. It is for Lady Rachel."

Rachel, very pale, tore open the envelope and read the message, turned pink, and then a tremendous, deep flush overran the pinkness, as a flood might sweep over a dew-wet meadow.

"Oh, Nicky!"

"What is it, Ray?"

"Yes," echoed Miss Effie and Miss Flora, who, being told by Esther Oughtenshaw that "t' telegraph lad was

cooming oop t' hill," had hastened down to hear the news. Rachel paid no attention to them; instead she gave the telegram to Cuckoo, and then, throwing her arms round Miss Effie's neck—(Miss Effie stood nearer to her than Miss Flora) she kissed that good lady soundly.

"To Paris?"

"To Paris, Nickums, to Paris, and no mamma! Just think of all the things she will give me!"

Then, more quietly, Rachel explained to her older hostesses that she must leave that very day, by the four o'clock bus; or no, she could get the "Grouse" fly; that her sister, Lady Rosamund Brinkley, was going to Paris for a month, and that Phil, her husband, who really was rather a love after all, was allowing her to take Rachel too.

"He's paying all my expies, of course, or mamma wouldn't let me go, and he's frightfully generous to Rosie, and she's a sweet pet, so I shall come back with some really decent clothes."

The disagreeable Jeanne was sent to pack, and Nellie flew down for the "Grouse" fly.

Cuckoo listened quietly to Rachel's babble of joy and plans. She was very pale and breathed hard, as if she had been running. When the girls were alone and Rachel was enlarging on her ideas for evening frocks which she meant to get in the rue de la Paix—no "clever little woman" for her—Cuckoo at last spoke.

"And will you wear these grand frocks in the cottage for Alison's benefit?"

"How disagreeable of you, Nicky! Why shouldn't I have pretty clothes, even though we are poor? It's only very silly women," she added, with an air of tremendous wisdom, "who give up looking nice when they are married. *I*," she went on proudly, delighted with her entirely exceptional solution to the quandary, "shall always look my best for my husband."

Cuckoo nodded.

"Quite right, only—most of these frocks, I should think, would do only for the very smartest balls."

Rachel's eyelashes, which embellishment she already darkened with a little pencil, were wet. Hers was the gift of the facile tear.

"I think you are very unkind," she declared. "There's the Season coming, isn't there?—and we aren't going to be married till September, anyhow. Anyone would think that you were jealous, Cuckoo," and she marched upstairs, leaving Cuckoo face to face with the unpleasant fact that the indirect accusation was true. She *was* jealous, painfully, bitterly, furiously jealous; jealous, not only of Rachel's prospective new frocks, but of her month in Paris; of the things she would see, the new and interesting people she would meet, the very things she would have to eat! Jealous of all these little things, but above all jealous of the elder girl's whole life and its conditions. Rachel was to have the "Season," balls, dinners, admirers and theaters, and she, Cuckoo, was to have nothing, just as she had always had nothing at Roseroofs. For a moment she stood there in the shabby, faded drawing-room, hating Roseroofs and all that belonged to it with a strength of hatred that most people luckily go to their grave without feeling, and even when the thought of George came to her, she only frowned with impatience as if a fly were buzzing in her face. Rachel had Alison besides all the other things, so her, Cuckoo's, possession of George, did nothing to even things up. Rachel was rich, in everything rich, and she, Cuckoo, was poor, vilely and miserably poor. She still stood there, the stocking she had been darning stretched over her left hand, when Rachel came back.

"Oh, Nicky dear," Rachel said, kissing her. "I didn't mean it, I'm so sorry."

"Didn't mean what?" growled Cuckoo, in the voice that had so amused her father.

"That—that you were jealous; of course I didn't mean it. Come along upstairs, darling——"

But Cuckoo didn't care a fig whether Rachel had meant it or not. It was true. She was jealous, and she knew that Rachel's extreme affectionateness and generosity of words meant only that Rachel was violently, irrepressibly happy. Rachel gave her two frocks, one of her best nightgowns, four pairs of silk stockings, and a hat, and Cuckoo accepted them with the proper expressions of gratitude but without enthusiasm. They were given, she knew, only because Rachel was so soon to have new and more beautiful ones. They were like Aunt Marcia's annual offerings to her sisters—Tads.

When the old fly had lumbered off in plenty of time to catch the train, and Rachel's waving hand had finally disappeared, Cuckoo went back to the house and up to her room. The Tads lay on her bed. They were undoubtedly the very best of their kind, but Tads they were, and the sight of them filled their new owner with a kind of cold rage. They seemed to be a sort of prophecy and symbol of her life as it was to be. Nothing fine and beautiful and first-hand was to be hers—only Tads. Her aunts were good and kind to her, but they were not her father and mother, and thus they, too, were Tads; Roseroofs was small and humble, but to the aunts it was a real home; to her, Cuckoo, who didn't really belong there, it too was a Tad, and worse, worse than all, George was a Tad. Yes, she loved him because she couldn't help it—oh, his dear rabbit-nose!—but he had no money, he had no position, he had no looks, he had really not even proper health, so he was a Tad.

At last, overwhelmed, beaten down, buffeted as if by

a great storm, the girl lay prone on the bed and cried.

Mrs. Skelton, the postmistress of Flaye, was in her kitchen getting the supper ready, about half-past six that evening. The door between the kitchen, which was "home," and the front room belonging to the King, as the children and grandchildren thought, was open, but the good woman was not expecting any more customers that day. It had been a busy day, for she had sent four telegrams and sold two postal orders, one for four pounds, as well as in all nearly three shillings'-worth of penny and half-penny stamps, but the day was over now, and in an hour and a half Mrs. Skelton would unhang the telephone receiver and bar the door and belong to her family again. The two youngest Skeltons sat by the table in the lamplight studying their next day's lessons, and in the little old oak cradle lay, sucking its comforter, the youngest of Oughtenshaw the Warcop draper's five daughters.

It was a pleasant time of day and Mrs. Skelton reflected as she beat up some eggs in a bowl, her daughter Sarah, Mrs. Oughtenshaw, who was paying her a visit of a week for a change of air, would soon be oop over from her visit of inspection to the shop on the Green. Sarah would be sure to bring all t' Warcop news, and they would have a good talk after supper. At that point in her reflections, the post-office door opened with a sharp tinkle of its pendant bell, and someone came in. Mrs. Skelton took off her apron and went behind the counter.

"Good evening," she began civilly, to break off in surprise. "Why, it's Miss Effie! Lord, save us, Miss Effie, 'as anything 'appened?"

Miss Effie, who wore a black woollen scarf over her hat and had turned up the collar of her coat, shook her head.

"No, Mary, nothing at all. I just want to send a telegram——"

Mrs. Skelton produced the forms and the usual richly-encrusted pens of country post-offices, and said no more. She was burning with curiosity, however. Never in her life had Miss Effie sent a telegram from Flaye. Moreover, Flaye was a good five miles from Roseroofs—whereas from Roseroofs to Warcop it was barely a mile—a heavy rain was beating down and it was black as night, but Miss Effie's grim face did not invite questions.

Miss Effie wrote out her message slowly, with the great distinctness of people who rarely send telegrams. Then she waited while Mrs. Skelton counted the words, and paid, and the good woman suggested her coming into the kitchen and standing a moment by the fire.

"You're wet through, Miss Effie." But Miss Effie wouldn't stay; she was in a hurry.

Mrs. Skelton held the door open while Miss Effie put up her umbrella, and the two women shouted a final good-night to each other against the great voice of the gale. Then Miss Effie was swallowed by the darkness.

Mrs. Skelton closed the door, took a look at the baby to see that it was still manipulating the comforter properly, and then went back to the office to send the telegram. She had just got Middleton Post Office on the telephone when the door again opened, this time with such a bang that the startled woman dropped the receiver.

"Good evening, Mary. It's only me, Miss Flora; did I frighten you?"

Miss Flora pulled the dripping blue veil from her face and took off her gloves.

"It's about the wire Miss Effie just sent. We've decided to change it a little," and she held out her hand.

"Oh, Miss Flowra, it's against t'law. Couldn't I just go and call Miss Effie back? Tommy could go——"

"Miss Effie is half-way across the moor by now, Tommy could never find her. Come, Mary, don't be foolish!"

"But it's against t'law, Miss Flowra."

Miss Flora waved her hands. "The wire's to our sister, Lady Fabricius," she said, with a most un-Flora-like hauteur, "and we wish to alter it a little. Give it me, Mary, unless you wish me to catch my death of cold standing here," and Mrs. Skelton obeyed.

Lady Fabricius, 65B, South Audley Street, London, W.—Please allow us to tell Cuckoo immediately that she is to come to you in the Spring. Urgent.

EUPHEMIA.

Miss Flora read it slowly.

"Won't it be delightful, Mary," she said, smiling, as she took up the pen, "for Miss Cuckoo to be presented to the dear Queen?"

"Oo-aye, Miss Flowra! You ain't going to alter it much?" she asked anxiously, her spare little form leaning across the counter.

"Oh, dear, no, Mary, only a few words." Miss Flora crossed out several words and printed her alterations neatly above them.

"There, can you read that, Mary? I'm sure you can; you're so clever——"

Obliged tell Cuckoo your generous plans for Spring. Strongly advise your having her immediately if possible. Very important.

EUPHEMIA.

Mrs. Skelton read this message aloud, dismay on her face.

"But it isn't t'same message at all, Miss Flowra."

Miss Flora smiled confidentially.

"Oh, the change is very unimportant, my dear Mary. You see, between you and me, Miss Cuckoo is getting a little tired of being always alone with just us. Not that she doesn't love us, you know—but—oh, well, she's eighteen, and I, Miss Effie and I, decided that it would be well for her not to have to wait till Spring for a little change of scene."

To Miss Flora's surprise, Mary Skelton looked at her for a long moment, eye to eye, thoughtfully, as if in her mind some idea were working.

"Do you understand?" Miss Flora asked.

"Aye, aye, Miss Flora, I understand. I'll send t'telegram," the woman answered slowly.

"Of course you will, Mary," laughed Miss Flora, with her characteristic, slightly artificial brightness, giving a little skip.

But Mary Skelton, who had three daughters of her own, didn't laugh.

"Girls get into mischief, Miss Flowra," she said gravely, "if they are too much alone, even when they are lady-girls——"

Supper was kept waiting nearly an hour that night, for a boy came up with a message that Miss Flora was dining at the Vicarage, and before this Miss Effie came in looking very tired, saying that she had been at Barty Raw's up toward Flaye.

"You know, Cuckoo?—the one whose wife died last Easter. It was pouring when I got there, and the old man made me a cup of tea."

Cuckoo nodded. She was not at all interested in old Barty Raw or in the singular fact that her aunts should have chosen that particularly inclement afternoon for a long walk.

Miss Flora got home about half-past nine, the Vicar having had her driven up in his dog-cart, but she was very wet, despite her umbrella and the rugs, and the sisters parted almost at the door and went to bed.

Next afternoon little Bobby Christie came up the hill with a telegram. Aunt Flora, Aunt Effie, and Cuckoo were at tea, and when Nellie came in with her little salver neither aunt showed the slightest interest in it.

"A telegram," said Miss Effie, pouring tea into her cup.

"Oh, a wire," said Miss Flora, as if wires were common enough in the house, but belonged to no one in particular, like flies.

It is odd, however, that when Nellie, who liked living in a house where telegrams came two days in succession, held the salver to Cuckoo both old ladies should have given a start of surprise.

The wire said:

Wish you to come immediately for a fortnight to see about your presentation gown and prepare for the Season. Love to your aunties.

AUNT MARCIA.

It was only on the death-bed of the first of the two to go that the aunts ever told each other the story of their having, unknown to each other, listened to Cuckoo's mad crying that afternoon, and their resulting pilgrimages through the storm to Flaye.

PART II

Two Years Pass

CHAPTER XV

THE old man leant on the counter, one elbow on a little square of black velvet, and poked the string of pearls about on another square.

"The little ones," he said, not more gutturally than speak certain of the very great ones of the earth, "are better suited to a pretty young throat."

"Yes, but think of the years when the pretty young throat will be old and stringy like a drum-stick, when the only pretty thing about it will be your pearls!"

He who passed his working hours among just such scenes, except that the gentleman, though not older and uglier than many of those who buy pearls for youg ladies, was obviously only a parent of some kind, did not interrupt the conversation. He was an elegant, princely young man who wore an immaculate frock-coat and smelt of *eau-de-fougère*.

The young lady, he thought, needed no assistance in what was plainly her object, that of obtaining the best possible pearls.

"These are ducks," she said, touching the string with a lingering hand. She had taken off her gloves, and the jeweller's gentleman noticed that the uncut emerald on her fourth finger was a fine one, only very slightly frosted.

"Shall I—shall I try them on?"

The old man smiled, his face, frog-like to a remarkable degree, softening charmingly as he did so.

"You wretch! That's why you wear no collar this icy day."

She slipped the long necklet over her head without even taking off her tiny black velvet toque.

"Am I becoming to them?" she demanded gently.

"You are, Cuckoo, you are, but—they are yellowish; not such a fine color as the smaller ones, are they?" he returned, turning to the frock-coated expert.

"Not quite, sir, perhaps, but—on the other hand they are, if I may say so, possibly more becoming to the young lady than the quite white ones. We find as a rule," he went on, grandly proprietary, poor gentleman, on his hundred and fifty pounds a year, "that only very pronounced blondes really prefer quite white pearls——"

Sir Adolph Fabricius gave his fat chuckle and said quietly, his little eyes resting with a certain sharpness for a moment on the speaker, "The large ones cost a hundred and fifty pounds more. You are an excellent salesman, and I trust that you get a good commission."

After a little more talk, the string of larger pearls was decided upon, and Sir Adolph, producing a fat, gold, heavily-chased fountain-pen and a book of dwarf checks, wrote out a check for the amount.

The salesman, who was an observer by nature, was surprised to see that the young lady watched the drawing of the check as if making a mental note of its amount rather than availing herself of one of the mirrors to admire herself in her new adornment. She was, he thought, unlike a daughter; she was undoubtedly behaving like a recent footlight success, one of those whose pearls are worn with such unconsciousness of their being very visibly and pitifully the exchange for the value of rubies.

As they turned to go, the salesman stopped them by leaning over the counter. "I have here," he said, in an imposing whisper, "a very curious and unusual jewel that it may interest the young lady to see."

"I am buying no more today," said Sir Adolph, fearful of an attempt on his purse by the skillful one.

"Oh, sir, no one could buy this jewel," the man re-

turned, with an odd look of vicarious pride. "It is an heirloom, in our hands for a few days for some slight repairs."

"Oh, yes, Uncle Adolph, do let us look at it," interjected Cuckoo.

The salesman, with an officiating air, bade them sit down again, and, after a moment, produced a shabby old leather case and laid it on one of his sacramental velvet squares.

"H'm," said Sir Adolph. Cuckoo drew a long breath. It was a long chain of beautiful diamonds, delicately, almost invisibly, set in either platinum or silver with marvellous flexibility. On it hung an odd, apparently valueless jewel. It was a kind of pale gold bag about six inches long, flexibly and beautifully wrought and closely studded with topazes. The string to the bag was a band of diamonds with seed-pearl tassels. The little jewel was delicately pretty and very old, but as a pendant to such a chain it was strikingly inadequate.

"What a funny thing!" Cuckoo burst out. "What is in the bag?"

The salesman smiled and held it out.

"Smell it," he said, unexpectedly.

Cuckoo took the chain and filtered it through her fingers till the bag lay in her hand.

"What is it? It's sage, or thyme—I don't know——"

Sir Adolph took it.

"It's—it's—well, I don't know. It's used in cooking, but I can't name it."

The young man beamed, as if he had, at one stroke, achieved great personal distinction.

"You are right, sir," he said, "it *is* used in cooking; it's saffron. I—of course, I can't tell you to whom it belongs, but it is saffron you smell. Odd thing, isn't it?"

As they went out of the shop, Cuckoo was frowning

thoughtfully. Saffron, she thought, a bag of saffron. Now where had she heard of that? Suddenly she remembered and told her uncle.

"Oh, that fellow's, is it? Janeways? Yes, I have heard of it. I remember your aunt told me about it one day. It's famous in its way—a kind of luck, you know. I believe several women have tried to make him give it to them—H'm, h'm," he broke off abruptly.

Cuckoo nodded.

"Yes, Rachel told me, Rachel Jackson. What a strange thing it is, but very ugly, don't you think?"

Cuckoo, very slim and smart in her blue coat and skirt, took her uncle's arm and gave it a little squeeze.

"It was darling of you, Onkelchen," she whispered. "You were a dear to give them to me."

The old man beamed, and there was something childlike and almost touching in the quality of his smile.

"I am very glad I am a rich man," he said, "it's so easy to make nice people happy. Have you spent the money I gave you for your pretty friendt?" he added.

"Yes, I went to such a heavenly shop in South Moulton Street," she returned, "and I got such loves of things. The bassinette is an absolute angel, and the little woollies —oh, Uncle, such *dears!*"

They had got into the gray-lined limousine, a car as big, it pleased Cuckoo to think, as some people's drawing-rooms, and the old man turned to her.

"Mind," he said, laughing, but with a look in his eyes that she knew, but never spoke of, "not a word of that to your Auntie."

"Never, Uncle dear. I don't think," she went on, "she will mind about the pearls, do you? My birthday *and* Christmas gift"——

He chuckled. "She never knew about the other birthday present, did she?"

Cuckoo frowned. "No. There was, you know, nothing to show for it. It wasn't likely I'd tell her about that beastly Bridge."

Sir Adolph looked at her. "You kept your promise, Cuckoo?"

She showed no resentment at the question, but told him, with a lightness betrayed by the look in her eyes, that she had kept her promise.

"Don't you trust me?"

Old Adolph Fabricius, "Old Fab," as he was called in the City, looked grave.

"Not quite, *mein kukuchen.*" She was silent, and after a moment he went on, as if apologizing to her for his perfectly just suspicion. "You remember about the young man, my dear?"

She drew one of the deep, sobbing breaths that always disturbed her in moments of emotion.

"Uncle Adolph—listen a moment; that was nearly two years ago. Our engagement had only been broken four months, and, well, I couldn't help it; he was ill, and I just had to go when he sent for me. Are you *always* going to remember it?"

"It was brecisely one year and seven months ago, and the fact that the young man was ill had nothing to do with the case." He nodded. "However, as you say, it's past and done. And about de Britch. I do believe you, but I must just ask you, once in a while."

She knew from long experience that it was utterly useless to try to make the old man conform to the usual rules of politeness. Most people, she knew, would have gone on disbelieving her after her deliberate breaking of her promise about George, or have forgiven her and wiped the memory, to all appearances, from their minds. But the old Jewish banker did neither. He loved her very dearly, and his indulgence was great, but because she had

failed him once, he took his own little measures from time to time of testing her, and nothing could stop this.

As the car glided along Park Lane, he spoke again.

"Cuckoo."

"Yes, Uncle Adolph?"

"Have you seen that young man again?"

Between her black hat and her black furs her little biscuit-colored face looked very pale, but she answered quietly.

"Twice."

"When?"

"Once about a year ago, at the play; he was in the stalls; and one day in September when I came up from Planings to take Kitty to the dentist."

"Did you speak to him?"

After a pause, she answered. "Yes, that time in St. James's Street I did. Kitty was with me."

"What did you say, Cuckoo?"

As if something in his ugly, unimposing little face was forcing her, she answered:

"I said—oh, I said, 'Hallo, George, what are you doing in town in September?' " She laughed, but Sir Adolph went on slowly, inexorably in his interrogatory.

"What did *he* say?"

"Uncle Adolph," she burst out angrily, "it's too bad of you. I told you little Kitty Poole was with me. She's nine and very intelligent. What *could* he have said before her?"

"I am not asking you," pursued the old man, unmoved, his confusion between d's and t's more marked as he went on, "what he *could* say, I am asking you what he *did* say. Tell me, Cuckoo."

The car had stopped at the old Georgian house that Sir Adolph had bought some years before from an impoverished nobleman, and the footman stood at the door of the

car, ready to open it. The old man held up his left hand —large, flat, flabby. The man touched his hat, drew back, and waited.

"Tell me, Cuckoo."

"Very well. He asked me why I wasn't married yet, if you *must* know." Seeing the hopelessness of resistance, she told him the exact truth, and he was satisfied.

"Ach so, and did you tell him why?"

"No, Uncle. What," she added, suddenly smiling, so that her one dimple played in her cheek, "what would you have told him if he had asked you?"

The great banker looked at her a little sadly.

"I should have told him," he said, "that it was because no one rich enough had asked me."

He then motioned to the footman to open the door, and they went into the house.

Number 65B was one of the old houses with a row of windows on either side of the door, that give to South Audley Street its ample, leisured aspect. The staircase, a very beautiful one of carved chestnut, sprang upward from a handsome, black-and-white marble floor, and separated into two branches half-way up, landing in opposite corners of the first floor. The walls were hung with the portraits of the very fine collection that was the old banker's greatest pride, and on the second floor, stretching magnificently the full breadth of the house, was the picture-gallery, to which, once a month, those art-loving members of the public who had provided themselves with tickets from Sir Adolph's private secretary, were allowed to make their way under that urbane young gentleman's very perfunctory guidance.

Cuckoo went straight to her room and took off her hat and furs. Then she stood for a moment looking at herself in the pier-glass that had been her first purchase with

her first quarter's allowance, given to her the day of her arrival in London nearly two years before.

"I hope," her aunt had said, when this acquisition arrived, "that you are not vain."

Cuckoo looked at her with her funny, crooked smile.

"You mean, Aunt Marcia," she answered pleasantly, "that I have no occasion to be. You need not worry; I know I am not pretty. That glass simply means that I am going to make the best of myself," and this she had learned in a really pre-eminent way to do.

Lady Fab, as most of her friends and acquaintances called her behind her back, gave a fleeting thought to this fact that November day as her niece came into the morning-room before lunch. Cuckoo was still too slim, and her frocks had to be arranged with care to conceal an incontrovertible flatness where she would fain have had roundness, but her blouse and skirt were perfect and her little head brushed and cared for until, thick and dry as her hair was, it yet was lustrous and smooth, and as without excrescences as a boy's, so closely was it packed away; and the odd little face, with its long chin and its scarlet mouth had, for those who liked it at all, a very strong charm.

"You look very smart, my dear," the old lady announced regally, looking her up and down. "That skirt's a great success, but you've got too much black stuff on your eyelashes."

Cuckoo took out her handkerchief, and going to the looking-glass, removed the offending surplus of grease-pencil. Making up her eyes was, however reprehensible the practice may be considered, a great improvement to her whole face, for she did it with care and skill, and it made her eyes look larger and more lustrous than they really were.

"Where have you been?" her aunt continued, as the butler announced lunch.

Cuckoo took from its corner a strong, gold-headed stick that of late years had been necessary to the old lady, and helping her rise, assisted her in her slow and elephantine progress to the dining-room. Lady Fabricius, who was now nearly seventy-five, was enormously fat, and her small feet, even when enjoying the luxury of heelless velvet house-shoes, could, in sober reality, hardly carry her.

"Where have we been?" echoed Cuckoo. "That's just it, Auntie; you know it isn't only my birthday present we have been buying, but my Christmas present as well."

"Considering," puffed her aunt, swinging like a huge chest in a crane, slowly into her place at the table, "considering that your birthday is in September, and Christmas five weeks off, I don't altogether see why you had any present at all today." She spoke with unusual geniality, but Cuckoo received at the same time a signal of distress from her uncle and didn't quite know what to say.

"When, my angel," the old gentleman asked suddenly (he had, since his wife's appearance, undergone a curious change of demeanor), "when did you say Bertie was coming?"

Under her complexion Lady Fabricius' skin took on a faint pink color.

"Thursday night, Adolph; only two days more."

Her little eyes, eyes ugly with the inevitable physical ugliness of old eyes, and which held none of the thousandfold compensations of expressional beauty seen in the eyes of the old whose lives have been good and gentle, filled with tears. "I can hardly wait, Adolph," she said tremulously.

The old man beamed. He was afraid of his wife but he adored her, and to him she was still the imperious beauty who had, to his never-ending amazement, conde-

scended over forty years ago to do him the honor of marrying him for his money.

"My poor Marcia," he returned. "I am even gladder for you than I am for myself. He should not have stayed away so long from you. I wass very angry when he decided to stay on in America."

The old lady set down her claret-glass and threw up her head, her poor old head richly bedight with warm auburn hair arranged in a bewildering pattern of plaits and rolls and little curls like sausages.

"He was right, Adolph, quite right to stay in America. Young men ought to travel; it broadens their minds,"——

Cuckoo, who was thinking of her pearls, caught the last words.

"How old is Bertie?" she asked innocently.

Sir Adolph frowned.

"He is—dear me," he answered hastily, in his most broken English. "How dime does fly. It is odd that you should only haf seen your cousin dat one dime, kukuchen. He won't know you now, will he, Mammachen?" He was allowed to call his lady "Mammachen" only, so to speak, on high days, holidays, and bonfire-nights, and Cuckoo realized that her aunt must, for some reason, be in a propitious mood—a mood not to be passed over unimproved.

"Auntie dear," the girl said hurriedly, jerking the pearls out from under her low collar, "look what Uncle gave me to celebrate Bertie's return."

Sir Adolph gasped in a surprised way, and calling Almond, the butler, broke his usual midday rule by having a brandy-and-soda, but this precautionary measure was unnecessary.

Lady Fabricius glared for a moment and asked the price of the pearls in a voice heavy with portent; but on Sir Adolph's raising his glass and drinking to the return

of her peloved poy, she held up her claret glass and returned the toast without any further discussion of the gift.

Cuckoo shivered with relief for the row about her emerald had been a serious one, and the ermine collar on her opera cloak had nearly resulted in her being sent back to Roseroofs. Not exactly ungenerous herself, Aunt Marcia had a deep-rooted objection to her husband spending in useless gifts any of the money he had made with his own brain, but from the first she had shown a disposition to be jealous of the old man's affection for Cuckoo.

"She's *my* niece, Adolph," she had said a disheartening number of times during the first months of Cuckoo's stay with them, "not yours." And the long-suffering Adolph had bowed to the storm, thinking deep within his old breast that things would indeed have been bad if Linchen and Lenchen and das kleine Olgachen, his own nieces, had by any evil chance been transported from Ullheim to South Audley Street. Marcia, his angel, would not have liked these solid young women, one of whom was happily married to a rich miller and known to her friends as "die Müllerin."

No, it was better, in spite of everything, that it was Marcia's niece and not his, who had come to share the good things he had achieved.

CHAPTER XVI

THURSDAY came, and Bertie was to arrive in the evening, having landed in Liverpool late in the morning. His rooms had been ready for some days, and after tea Lady Fabricius and her niece went up in the lift to inspect them. Beautiful, luxurious rooms they were, and by way of a welcoming gift there was spread about the dressing-room a toilet service of solid gold, with "H. L. F." all over it in block letters.

"He loves gold," Lady Fabricius had said pensively, as if she had said, "He loves Mozart," or "He loves pansies."

Cuckoo laughed. "So do most people," she said.

"They don't. Your uncle, for instance. All his things are silver, aren't they, Parsons?"

Mrs. Parsons, the housekeeper, whose arrangements for the coming of the great Bertie were, so to say, being reviewed by the Commander-in-Chief, nodded.

"Oh, yes, my lady, everything. Everything of Sir Hadolph's are silver, but Mr. Ubert, 'e was always for gold, he was, cigarette-cases, and match-boxes, and all such similar jee-jaws."

Cuckoo was dining out that night, but she meant to have a look at the Great One before she went, so she dressed early, in black which she very often wore, and then, waiting till she heard the car drive up and dashing downstairs in an appearance of great hurry, she met her cousin on the stairs, "according to plan." They shook hands hastily after his "I beg your pardon—you're Cuckoo, of course." And she rushed on, making, she knew,

an interesting and arresting picture in her black gown and with her orange velvet cloak, with the famous ermine collar, wrapped round her.

Hubert Fabricius was a heavily-built, brick-red man of about eight-and-thirty. He was a little bald, and she knew his face, already blurred in outline, the edges less keen than they had been, would eventually be very shapeless and heavy. His eyes, however, were really rather beautiful; dark violet eyes with long lashes; they were bloodshot and the lids were a little swollen, but the color in itself was, she noticed, the deep, unusual violet of Aunt Flora's.

These things the girl turned over in her mind on the way to Grosvenor Place. She had seen him only once before, and that was on the evening of her arrival in London nearly two years ago. He had been on the point of starting for the Riviera, and though he had been in London once or twice since then, she had on each occasion chanced to be away: once at Roseroofs and once at Planings with Lady Pelter, who had taken a great fancy to her. She was not unaware of the effect Bertie's return might not improbably have on her own position. It could be regarded as a kind of milestone on her road. Lady Fabricius had been very kind to her, kind to a degree that had caused surprise, though no discussion at Roseroofs. Miss Effie and Miss Flora had never realized that their elder sister had really loved poor May; they had known that she would keep her promise to Blundell; they knew that the two hundred pounds a year was Cuckoo's for life, but they had not expected for Cuckoo, more than one or two "Seasons"—for Seasons were definite-dated things in those days—and now nearly two years had passed since Cuckoo had been, not visiting, but at home in South Audley Street. Twice she had been to Roseroofs for a fortnight at a time, but without a word

on the subject being said, it was quite clear to everybody that she regarded herself as a guest there. Her home was with Uncle and Aunt Fab, and now, as she bowled along in the comfortable car that was as large as some people's drawing-rooms, her quick mind was envisaging all the points in her situation. She smelt danger.

Lady Fabricius adored Bertie, and Sir Adolph adored Lady Fabricius. "Suppose," the girl thought with a horrid pang, "that Bertie doesn't like me. If he didn't, and he wanted her to, she'd pack me off at five minutes' notice, and then where should I be?"

It was characteristic of her that she bore no malice towards her aunt, as she faced this probable eventuality. Her aunt had been remarkably kind to her and she knew it, but the nest in South Audley Street was not her home, and if the returned wanderer found the stranger took up too much room in it, the mother-bird would not only kick the stranger out, but would have a right to do so.

"I am well named," Miss Blundell thought, as the car stopped. "I *am* a Cuckoo."

She frowned impatiently, for it made her very angry that she was a failure; and she *was* a failure in that she had not been adroit enough to secure a nest for herself—a real nest of her own—and she knew it.

She danced well and had a thousand friendly acquaintances among men, and one or two of the strictly ineligible class had invited her to share their futures, but not one man who was, as she put it, "worth marrying," wanted her. A big Australian millionaire whom she had done her best to marry, had summed her up in a home letter in fairly just terms.

Billy is rather smitten [he wrote] with a little girl here, a niece of an old Jew banker. I rather like her myself and have seen something of her. She'd do splendidly in some ways for Billy, for she's as strong as a rat and has a will of iron, could

stand any kind of weather and any amount of "roughing" it if she wanted to, only—she would not want to! She has been having a go at my £ s. d., but I'm not taking any, thanks; too business-like to suit me, and I should think has got as much capacity for loving as a steel poker.

So poor Cuckoo was a failure. One fine thing about her at that period, was her courage in boldly facing this horrid fact, and, after dinner, which from her point of view had been very dull, she settled herself in a lonely corner to listen to Caruso who, for some little Balkan king's ransom, was to sing two songs, and went on with her reflections. Suddenly illumination came to her. She had just reflected that, while Aunt Marcia would be sure to hurl her beloved boy at the daughters of duchesses and countesses and so on, the daughters of the duchesses and countesses are not so keen on new money as they used to be, and lots of them really seem to prefer good blood.

Then the great idea came. "Sixty thousand pounds a year is not so very much nowadays, and until dear Uncle Fab dies Master Bertie can't have more than five thousand—not much of a catch for the big families, but he might be made to do for me—if he would have me!"

There was in her thoughts neither conceit nor humility; she was doing that thing so unusual in everybody, but perhaps most of all in a young girl, facing her situation with absolute candor and laying her plans according to bare possibilities. And as she sat in deep distraction the after-dinner guests began to arrive.

Signor Caruso was already there and stood talking to a very tall Beauty. His accompanist was at the piano; there was the usual confusion as people settled into their places and Cuckoo was undisturbed. She was not a music lover, but everybody who has had the good fortune to hear that most marvellous of voices, must be enthralled by it, and gradually the girl's thoughts melted into a soft con-

fusion of feeling. The great tenor was singing a simple song, and the inexpressible magic of his voice laid the room under as strong a spell as was even the Palace of the Sleeping Beauty; and suddenly Cuckoo, raising her eyes and moving a little forward to get a better view of the singer, caught sight of one of the latest arrivals who stood at the far end of the room leaning against the door. It was George. Her first feeling was one of intense, sincere exasperation that he should appear now, just when she was so busily arranging to marry Hubert Fabricius. She would be upset for days and she knew it, and resented it. George had not yet seen her, and his large eyes were filled with the blindness of a deep dream. Cuckoo perceived with approbation that his dress clothes were new, but her heart trembled to see how very pale he was, and that there were triangular shadows under his cheek-bones. How an unknown young man from the country had the good luck to be included in the list of the very great lady who was his hostess, Cuckoo did not ask herself. If she had met George in a thieves' kitchen, or in the Pope's oratory, she would not have been surprised. He was George, therefore it was always natural to her to see him. Oh, how she wished he hadn't come!

When the song ceased, of the latter part of which she had not heard one note, Cuckoo rose and crept quietly across the room to her hostess. She had a headache, she said, and feared she must go. And there was George stuck like an owl on a barn-door in her very path. She waited a minute as he slowly started towards two ladies sitting together not far off.

"If he speaks to them I can slip out," the girl thought, but just as she neared the door, the young man turned and saw her.

"Cuckoo," he cried, coming to her, "are you glad to see me?"

She laughed. "You idiot, George, to ask me that!"

"Yes, but are you?" he persisted gently.

"Delighted, of course. Have you been in town long?"

"I have lived in London for six months, Cuckoo," he answered quietly. "I have a studio in Chelsea and am painting."

If only his eyelashes didn't flicker in that distracting way, and if only his little white teeth were not so beautiful!

"Well, I must be off," she said. "Glad to have seen you, George. Give my love to the Vicar."

He looked at her gravely, shaking his head.

"You don't fool me a bit, you know. You are every bit as glad to see me as I am to see you. Come to the Round Pond at eleven tomorrow."

"Good Heavens, no!"

"Why not?"

"Because—oh, don't be silly, George; of course I can't come. Besides, I don't want to."

He shook his head again and smiled. "Yes," he said, with gentle obstinacy, "you do want to. And you needn't be afraid," he added seriously. "I'm not going to ask you to marry me."

Her stare was almost ludicrously surprised.

"Then why——" she began.

"Dear old Cuckoo—I want to talk to you; you aren't happy——"

After a pause during which she seemed to hear a crash of all her defenses as they fell, she said indifferently:

"Oh, well, if you aren't going to be silly and try to make love to me, I'll come. All that nonsense was over nearly two years ago, anyhow, and there's no real reason why we shouldn't be friends."

She nodded and left him.

Caruso was singing again as she put her cloak on, and

while the car was being called, she stole back up the stairs to listen. George had changed his position and was facing the door, so that he saw her. He didn't move, and yet, as she stood there, he seemed to cross the room towards her, to come through the door, to put his arms round her; and together, it seemed to her, close together, they were listening to the divine voice. . . .

When the song ceased George did not join her. Their eyes broke away from each other's, and she went slowly downstairs. All the way home she leant back in the corner with her eyes shut.

CHAPTER XVII

AS the car drew up at 65B, a taxi left the door, and Cuckoo saw a man standing on the steps. It was her cousin Hubert.

"That's right," he exclaimed in an undertone, taking out his latchkey as she joined him, "I thought it was you."

He looked very big and rather imposing, she thought, in his fur-collared coat, and as she paused at the foot of the branching staircase to say good-night, his violet eyes held hers in a way she liked.

"Don't go up," he said. "Come into the library, and we'll have something to eat and you can tell me about —things."

"What things?" she asked gravely.

"Oh—Mother says Caruso was to sing; did he? Tell me about him, or about anything else, so long as you come."

He took off her cloak and laid it on a chest; then he took off his own coat, and she saw that in spite of his bulkiness he looked his best in evening dress. Perhaps, after all, she thought, her plan might not be so dreadful of accomplishment. He was physically a far handsomer man than poor, thin, narrow-chested George. She also liked his adroitness in forestalling any talk among the servants by immediately ringing for Almond and ordering a brandy-and-soda for himself, and a bottle of stone ginger with lemon for her. Moreover, he did not make the blunder of explaining to her that he thought it best that, having opened the door with his latchkey, and the

servants being up, to have the man in, but she knew and appreciated his carefulness.

"Is her ladyship in bed, Almond?" he asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Yes, sir, her ladyship had a headache, I believe, and went to bed very early, sir."

"Then we won't disturb her to-night, Cuckoo."

Cuckoo nodded. "Oh, dear, no." Then, with a sharp glance at Almond's expressionless face, she added, "I never go up to her in her room unless she sends for me."

The library, a large, square room lined with fine books, was a satisfactory stage for an important interview. Cuckoo liked it. Her little black-clad figure looked its best against the browns and golds of the books and the moss-green velvet hangings, and she knew it. She stood in the big chimney-place, one hand on the mantelpiece, looking into the fire. Fabricius watched her keenly; she felt the keenness and knew, without seeing, just when it kindled to something more. Among the logs on the hearth glowed big blocks of peat—squares of liquid fire they looked—and their scent mingled with that of the hundreds of old calf-bound books; the leisured sound of the big clock—ticking is too slight a word for its deep and sonorous note—gave the girl a strong feeling of being encouraged and backed in her enterprise. She felt that she had the right to live in such a room, amid such scents, and sights, and sounds. She put the thought of George resolutely from her mind. She would marry Fabricius and "have things," but she would make him happy as well.

"Cuckoo," he said suddenly, "what are you thinking of?"

She started. "Oh, nothing. I was looking at the fire; you know how one does—not thinking of anything—but I think the smell of the peat gets into one's head."

"Well, put it out of your head," he said nervously,

with a bantering note in his voice. "You have changed since I last saw you."

In his study at the back of the house, old Sir Adolph sat thinking. The room was small and had only one window. He had chosen it because it was very quiet and it was comfortable. He sat in an armchair by the fire; he wore a quilted smoking-jacket of plum-colored silk, and on his large, flat feet was a pair of slippers embroidered in bullion. Those slippers were blatantly of German origin and had been worked for him on the far-off banks of the Main by Linchen and Lenchen as a Christmas gift. Lady Fabricius could not endure them, so he wore them only when he was sure that they would not wound her eyes. But he liked them, for they were roomy and warm, and besides, Linchen and Lenchen had made them; Linchen and Lenchen, his only sister's daughters, whom he had not seen since they were little children. His smoking-cap, which was very ornate and grand and had a gold tassel that bobbed about his face when he moved suddenly, was an offering from an unknown niece-in-law, Frau Chimney-Inspector Schlott, in Dresden. Sir Adolph had lived many years in England, but his old blood was still true to his kind.

There was only one electric light on, for the old man liked the firelight, and as he sat there in the midnight quiet he was lapped in old memories.

Over the mantelpiece hung a very badly painted portrait of a man in the high stock of Napoleon's day, and Sir Adolph had begun to think of his early life, for the old Jew with the subtle, clever face was his grandfather, whom he could best remember as a very ancient man with no teeth and eyes that still blazed like fire somewhere far back in his head. This old man, Isaac Fabricius, had been a horse-dealer and money-lender in one of a string

of long, dirty, ugly villages on the Main, near Frankfort. Where he had originally come from nobody, not even himself, knew, but he had not been of the solid, agricultural type. He was a clever, shrewd man, possessed of various little lodes of knowledge from which he drew unexpected treasures when occasion arose. The Napoleonic wars were, for example, an occasion for him, and his knowledge of French had been said, his grandson remembered, to have enabled him to do much profitable work as a spy. At all events, when, early in the twenties, he again settled, as far as such spirits ever settle, at Overheim-am-Main, it was plain that he was not a poor man. Until he was very old he had, assisted by his son, gone on plying his double trade, and when he died, in his grandson's childhood, he was a rich man for his class.

And now old Sir Adolph, sitting in his splendid London house, passed mentally from his grandfather to contemplation of his own childhood. How well he remembered the village, the long, cobbled street, the sordid, dirty, stone house, possessing for a garden a kind of pit outside the front door, where a manure heap lay and accumulated and rotted. An occasional geranium in a window was the only flower the boy and his sister ever saw in their childhood. In the ill-defined little square—more a widening of the street than a real square—stood the village pump, and here it was the women came to fill the great, flattened casks they carried strapped to their backs. The church was beautiful in the florid way of the Rococo Period; fat-bellied angels clustered on the façade; the windows were overhung by heavily-carved frills of stone, and above the strong door stood a clumsy St. Christopher carrying the Christ. The small Adolph and the small Gretchen admired the church, but were not allowed to go into it because they were Jews.

Their father's house, by far the most comfortable in

the village, stood, not in the main street, but in what was called "the Judenhof"—the Jews' quarter, a cluster of houses isolated from the village, at the end of a very muddy lane. To the end of his life Adolph Fabricius associated great muddiness with the lane to the Judenhof. His father, Vältele (pronounced Feltyleh) was not a good Jew, and he was disliked by all the orthodox Jews, but as he was rich he was tolerated, tolerated by the ugly women with the black jute wigs, by the serious, bearded men who were then truer to the Old Testament type than they are now, possessing the silent, abstemious unmirthfulness that must have been possessed by those who, in the Wilderness, so eternally murmured against poor Moses. Vältele Fabricius was a rich man, so he was forgiven much. They had, the child knew, even forgiven him his un-Jewish wife in time.

"Was my mother a Christian?" he had once asked his father, as they sat at their supper a bitter cold night, in the over-heated, airless living-room. His father, already an old man, although the boy was but ten, turned his queer, hooded eyes on him.

"Yes," he said. "Your mother was a Christian; she was a good and brave woman."

His mother had been good and brave, the old man reflected, and he too had been good. He laughed softly as he thought how little people knew how he had made his money. But he knew, and he knew that he had been honest and fair. He had also fulfilled the practice of that greatest of Jewish virtues—charity. His mother would not have been ashamed of him if she had lived.

When he was fourteen his father had died, and he and his sister had gone to live in Frankfort. After that he had had no youth. He did not dwell long on the thought of his dull, monotonous work in a pawnbroker's shop that had started him in his career. The Franco-Prussian war

had made his fortune in the end, and the next event in his life was his meeting his beautiful and wonderful Marcia, and the miracle of her becoming his wife. How beautiful she had been! His dreams were very romantic, but he sighed as he came to his son. They had been married some years when the boy was born, and Lady Fabricius, like all selfish, spoiled women, had treated her child as if he were indeed herself—her very flesh. She had accorded to him the senseless indulgence and favor she had always given herself, and as a natural result the boy had grown up badly. He had grown up as no man, whether he be German Jew or English gentleman, likes his son to grow up. He was selfish, self-indulgent, and profligate; his strength of will was tremendous in so far as it was devoted to the getting of his own way, but he was weak to an equal degree in any matter where his own comfort was involved. He had been expelled from Eton, and his Oxford career had been a series of blows to his father. "Bertie Fab," as he was called, had been asked to take his name off the books of his College, and later he had been obliged to withdraw from a very famous club; he drank, and for some years his tastes were unusually low. But of these things his mother either knew or cared nothing. To her he was what she indiscreetly called "her beautiful boy," and, to do him justice, his good side, such as it was, was always turned to her, and poor old Sir Adolph did his best to bear his shame and disgrace without letting his wife see that he was unhappy.

It was at this time, just after the episode of the Club, that she had invented the theory, in which she came to believe, that her husband had liver trouble. The old man smiled as he remembered his amazement on the first occasion when this entirely imaginary malady of his was used to cover his uncontrollable depression. He had been so surprised, and Marcia had been so glib!

"I must take him," Lady Fab had said, "to Karlsbad. It is the only place, so we must go there, though I loathe it."

Sir Adolph loathed Karlsbad too, but patiently he underwent the cure there year after year, saying little, trotting about by himself, a small, lonely, unshapely old man, not unthankful for the excuse that the liver-complaint gave him for solitary walks and the silence and moodiness that he could not always, even for his wife's sake, dominate.

"After all," he wondered, as he sat that night over the fire, "perhaps it wass my liver. Some old philosopher has said that the liver is the seat of the affections,"——

It is a question whether Lady Fabricius loved her son more deeply than did her husband, but there is no doubt that the old man himself had always treated her love for the boy as something beyond his own powers of achievement. For years he had been torn between his duty as a father, knowing that he ought to correct his son and enforce his authority over him, and his pitying, tender longing to protect his wife from the very shadow of pain. When things had got to their worst point, Bertie had had the wisdom to be persuaded to go round the world, and since then he had, off and on, traveled a good deal. "I suppose," Sir Adolph mused, "that it has been a relief to me to have the poor boy away, but it has nearly broken his mother's heart"—which was an entire mistake; for Lady Fabricius' heart, though doubtless full of love for her son, was sentimentally in the *status lymphaticus*, there was too much of herself there to allow of anyone, even Bertie, permanently disturbing its indolent well-being.

During his son's travels, Sir Adolph had had only two serious liver attacks; one supervening on a letter from the British Ambassador at St. Petersburg, as it was then called, and one after the visit of an old Spanish friend of

his from Valparaiso. Lady Fabricius had had no knowledge of the occasion of these sharp bouts of her husband's, but Cuckoo had been a great help to the lonely old man during their duration. For she had at once seen that his illness was mental, not physical, and her tact and powers of distraction inherited from her father, had helped him more even than she had really known. For Cuckoo, like her father, had a cage with a bird in it; in fact, her cage had two birds in it, of the existence of the second of which she was only just beginning to be aware; its uses, even yet, were a puzzle to her, but she was beginning to learn them, and Bertie Fab was destined to help her. This charm, independent of beauty, for of beauty she had little or none, or of intellect, for her double-barrelled education had turned out rather a muddled affair and she had no compensating love of books; or of sweetness, for Cuckoo was not sweet; the charm, the one she had always recognized and used, not the new one, greatly endeared her to her old uncle. Under its influence he even went so far as to let her see that his trouble was not unconnected with his absent son. His mind turned to Cuckoo now as she sat only a hundred yards from him, liming her little twigs, weaving her little traps, digging her little pits. Although he loved her as a niece, she puzzled him and sometimes hurt him as a girl.

"I wonder," he thought, "what will become of her? Perhaps, after all, we were unwise not to let her see the Loxley boy. He is a good *kerl*, and might have brought out the best in her"——

Bertie Fab was an old bird and wily, but he had fallen under Cuckoo's spell and saw not the lime on her twigs. He was unlike George in that her attraction for him blinded him to her lack of beauty. He thought her extremely pretty, as well as dangerously desirable, and he

was completely fooled by her attitude of detachment. He had always believed himself, and with reason, a lady-killer, and his love-affairs had never been distinguished by any very white sense of honor; but Cuckoo was his own cousin and in his mother's house, so even that evening the idea of marrying passed through his brain. He was falling in love with her and knew it and welcomed the fact, for it was some months since he had been in that, to him, habitual and pleasant condition. He was a lonely man when not in love. He had found recently somewhere the tag-end of a French quotation, and with the suppleness of mind that he had inherited with his Jewish blood and that so sharply contrasted with his unwieldiness of build, he brought the lines into the conversation:

"Et partout le spectre l'amour
Et nulle part de l'amour——

"I suppose that is true," he said, as he finished his brandy-and-soda, his face a little redder and a little more blurred at the edges than it had been. "Ghosts of love and no real love." Cuckoo looked at him with grave eyes.

"I hope that's not true," she said. "It would make life very desolate."

"Spectres are all very well," he returned, "to pass the time until the real thing comes along."

She nodded, playing her dimple slyly.

"How do you know the real thing, when it does come," she said, "if you have been playing about with spectres?"

"How do you know when a real person comes into the room, after you have thought you heard people coming when no one was there?" He poured out some more brandy, and she rose.

"I'm sure I don't know," she said. "I've never been in love myself, except in a childish way." This was wis-

dom, for she knew quite well that his father or mother might one day happen to reveal to him the story of George. "Well, I think I'll go now. Good-night."

They went upstairs together in silence, and half-way up Cuckoo's heel caught in the carpet and she would have fallen in all good faith but for his catching her. Having caught her in his arms he held her for a moment, his heart giving a bound which she distinctly felt against her bare shoulder, and he kissed her roughly. She pushed him away and fled upstairs without a word.

"I say, Cuckoo," he called softly, his voice thick, "don't be angry. I'm sorry—I—a fellow loses his head. I beg your pardon"—— but she was gone.

She closed her door, and walking soberly to her bed, sat down and reviewed the situation.

"That was true," she said. "He *couldn't* help it, and his heart was going like a donkey-engine, I felt it; two points; and his voice was like poor Captain Browne's—hoarse and jerky; three points. So far, so good." She rose, and switching on all the lights in the room, stood in front of her pier-glass and looked at herself. "You have been a horrid failure up to this," she thought, as deliberately as if she were speaking aloud. "The right men don't want to marry you; you haven't any real friends, as other girls have, and you've got one more chance, and that's Bertie. Bertie is attracted. He is going to lose his head and you can marry him, if you are very careful." Then she began slowly to undress, her face suddenly drawn and dusky. "Aunt Marcia will rage," her thoughts went on, "but that won't matter. I *can* marry him, and I *will* marry him, and there will be no more nonsense about George."

There was no vacillation in her mind. Her chance had come and she would take it, and George would wait in vain at the Round Pond. She didn't know where he lived,

so she couldn't let him know she was not coming, and she dared not go, for she dared not see him again. "He'll have a silk handkerchief round his poor, delicate throat," she moaned, rolled up, a ball of misery, in her soft bed. "His dear nose will be rabbitier than ever if it's cold and—he'll wait, and wait, and wait; his darling old blind eyes popping out of his head as every new girl comes into view, and then—and then he'll go back to his poor studio and lock the door,"——

She cried herself to sleep—but she didn't go to the Round Pond.

CHAPTER XVIII

CUCKOO BLUNDELL'S chase of the Fabricius millions proceeded very satisfactorily for a few days. Bertie was, in a secret, cautious way, very devoted to her, and her influence grew every time they met. However, it would behoove her to advance very warily in this particular jungle, and she knew it, for not only was the quarry a scarred and experienced brute, but he was not alone; wary eyes watched out for him, and powerful paws and jaws, she knew, were ready to destroy her if her tracking of him were perceived. However, two things were in her favor; Sir Adolph and Lady Fab both went early to bed and neither of them breakfasted in the dining-room, Sir Adolph, because his breakfast consisted of a cup of coffee and two pieces of *Zwieback* at six o'clock, after which he worked in his study until nine and then went to the City; and Lady Fab breakfasted sumptuously in bed and never came downstairs until after eleven. On the third day after their first interview, Bertie and Cuckoo had eaten their eggs and soles in the stimulating atmosphere of that rarest of meals between an unmarried man and a girl—a *tête-à-tête* breakfast.

Bertie didn't look his best at 9.30 a.m. His red face, which held, in spite of its redness, something of the cloudy darkness of the Oriental's, looked less white than ever, and his eyes were at that hour always unusually swollen and bloodshot. Cuckoo looked at him in an unemotional and stock-taking way during the silence that they broke only by an occasional remark for the servants' benefit. She was trying her best to like him, and the thickness

of his neck and the powerful muscles of his shoulders really attracted her, but she hated the redness of his eyelids and she wished his mouth were not so moist looking.

She herself always dressed with unusual care for breakfast, and her écru crêpe-de-Chine blouse, just showing the pearls tucked away against her skin, threw into fine relief the darkness of her hair and eyebrows and the vivid red of her lips. The dining-room, a huge place with a magnificent Adam ceiling and a few fine black-framed portraits, gave them, at their small table in the window, a pleasant babes-in-the-wood feeling—a feeling of two people on a very little island in a big sea. It was sometimes said of the Fab House that Lady Fab must have wonderful taste; but this was—though, considering Adolph's common and insignificant looks, a natural one—a mistake. It was old Fab, he who had lived in the Judenhof in the German village, who made the house what it was. Whence he drew it he knew no better than the people who ate his food and laughed at his accent, but there it was, an impregnable, delicate taste that, rooted in a really marvelous sense of period, flowered in an instinct which never erred and, what is more unusual, a perfect sense of the beauty of space. Hence his house was a place of ample emptiness, of justice-giving lack of crowding, of respectful placing of the treasures so many people would have ruined by setting too close together. Even the shadows of his splendid pieces of furniture thus had a chance of being beautiful and unconfused.

Cuckoo loved the whole house, for to her, too, appreciation if not active taste had been given. But for some reason she liked the dining-room best of all, and she decided, as she ate her breakfast under the benevolent eye of Almond, that considering the beauty of the house and of this particular room, Bertie would not do at all badly at the head of her table for the rest of her life. He

certainly looked as if he had drunk more than was good for him, and indeed she knew that there were times when he drank more than would have benefited any five men. But, after all, it had as yet not made much mark on him. She would not let him drink too much, and then his really beautiful violet eyes—it was odd that they should be like Aunt Flora's—would lose their ugly redness and the loose fat into which the points of his collar cut so deep, would vanish.

Every now and then she met his eyes. He had a peculiar hard stare that, in its fixity, was almost insolent. She returned these gazes coolly, looking away after a moment as if she instinctively felt it was not quite what he had expected or wished. When she rose he politely opened the door for her.

"Good-bye," she said carelessly.

"What are you doing this afternoon?"

She looked at him vaguely as if trying to remember.

"I don't know; nothing particular."

"Come up to Hampstead Heath with me. I'll get a car. We might have tea at the 'Spaniard's.' "

She laughed. "I should be delighted," she said with a little curtsey, "if Aunt Marcia says I may," and she ran upstairs without waiting for his reply.

Fabricius stared after her for a moment, after he had audibly damned her Ladyship, realizing the fact that her dark little face, with its jutting jaw and its misty black eyes, was stirring him and thrilling him as he had never been stirred and thrilled before. He was a man used to making a vivid impression on women, for he had very strong animal magnetism and the curious brainlessness that is so often found in the successful heart-eater—men of highly cultivated minds are rarely successful libertines, not only because they don't care to be, but because there is in them either a certain lack, or a certain surplus, that

is fatal to this particular form of sport. Fabricius had no brain and he was a particularly perfect specimen of his kind. He was a passionate man, but he also adored the *menus plaisirs* of love; he loved flattery, petting and cajolery; he loved to be dressed for and made much of; he liked dramatic scenes, he liked to be watched for, and wept for, and in this last point he was a very rare male, for he actually enjoyed tears up to a certain point.

As he smoked his after-breakfast cigarette, he wondered how long it would take Cuckoo to be in love with him as he meant her to be. Probably not long, he decided. It was a great thing her being in the house with him, and although, in spite of that first flashing idea of marriage across his mind, he was now giving no thought at all to the future, yet there was a strong, perverse charm to him in the fact that his love-making was to take place, so to speak, under the very nose of his mother. It was very simplifying to live under the same roof with the object of one's passion; it dispensed with the minor difficulties, such as calling and finding the object surrounded by mothers and fathers, or brothers and sisters, or friends. Bertie Fab hated rain and wind; he objected to anything but the most luxurious ways of getting about the wet, winter streets of London. He liked comfortable chairs, bright fires, and he loathed wet feet as a cat loathes a bath. He need never go out to see Cuckoo and he could see her at all hours of the day. All these things were very pleasing.

Meantime, Cuckoo regarded him and the situation in almost exactly the same way, except that her object was unswervingly and unchangeably matrimonial. She knew that he was violently in love with her and this amused her as well as encouraged her efforts. Passion left her as untouched as if she had been Una instead of a mercenary modern girl running down a husband; she would marry

him and then she would "have things." She reflected comfortably about the things she would have.

She lunched out that day, and when she got home at about three, found her cousin waiting for her.

"Mother and father are out," he said. "She's playing Bridge at her Club, and you and I are going to Hampstead Heath. Have you got on proper shoes?"

"I have," she said, "but you haven't."

"I never wear thick boots," he said; "they hurt my feet. We sha'n't walk, anyhow; I've telephoned for a car to meet us at Charbonnel's."

They walked briskly to Bond Street, and after buying a box of chocolates got into the car and flew up to the Highlands of London. It was a beautiful day, sunny and blue-topped, and Cuckoo was very happy. The girl she had lunched with, a bride of some three months' standing, had been formerly as poor as she herself was and by her marriage had achieved wealth and a title in one stroke. She was very happy with her enormous pearls, and her rubies, and her beautiful houses, yet Cuckoo knew that once upon a time she had believed herself to be in love with a comparatively penniless subaltern, and the fact of her contentment cheered and lighted Cuckoo on her way.

Cuckoo at this period liked girls who had made rich marriages and were happy. One or two cases in which her acquaintances had made financially unsuccessful but happy marriages she avoided instinctively, as one avoids the sight of something certain to give one pain. Evie was blissful—she was blissful because she was rich, and Cuckoo, in order to be blissful, must be rich. She was going to be rich.

The little walk had lent a look of greater youth to her, and, for a moment, to Bertie as well; he had gone to bed early the night before and his eyes were clearer. Cuckoo looked at him with a proprietary feeling not in

the least betrayed in her steady little face. After all, he was a great deal better than Eve's man.

They stopped the car at the top of the Heath and walked for half an hour. Cuckoo, of course, was used to walking and loved it, and Bertie, who detested exercise, had known this, and because of it had brought her. A little color crept into her thin cheeks; her eyes glowed as they met the fresh, high air.

"Don't you miss the country?" he asked.

She shook her head, for the country meant Roseroofs, and Roseroofs meant George, and that way misery—madness, lay.

"No. I like the country in summer, but I should never want to live there more than a couple of months in the year."

"You couldn't live in London ten months."

"No," she returned carelessly, "but I could travel. I like the South of France; I should like to have a villa there."

This was a well-delivered blow, for Bertie's idea of heaven was Monte Carlo.

"How are the old aunts?" he began again, after she had watched the idea of their similarity of tastes sink into his mind.

"Oh, they're all right; much the same; drying up slowly, poor old dears. I think Aunt Flora will blow away some day like a dry old leaf."

"And how's old Loxley?"

"Do you know Dr. Loxley?" Cuckoo asked, fighting against the stiffness that always came to her throat when she was obliged to talk of George.

"Yes, he sometimes comes to town and always comes to see the Mater. A nice old fellow, I thought him."

"He *is* nice; he's a great dear," she answered, and then she changed the subject abruptly. It was hateful to her

that even the thought of George could, so to speak, come between her and the sun. She had been quite happy until that unlucky remark of Bertie's, but now the image of George standing huddled together, with his collar turned up and his nose red in the wind, by the Round Pond, had destroyed her peace. "It's a jolly good thing," she thought savagely, "that I don't know where he lives, or it would be just like me to lose my head and bolt off to see him, and upset the whole apple-cart."

The owner, as Bertie Fab might be called, of the apple-cart in question, walked on beside her quite happily, never noticing her change of mood, and this, although convenient, incensed her. George would have known that she was put out, that something had come between them; George always knew.

Bertie Fab suddenly looked to her almost Falstaffian in his unwieldiness, and she set her teeth. "I will *not* think about it," she vowed angrily.

They had tea at the "Spaniard's," and then got into the car and went on into the country for some miles. Fabricius did not break Cuckoo's persistently recurring silences, and she was grateful for this, though she need not have been, for his lack of volubility was not prompted by any consideration for her, but by a certain Pasha-like state of satisfaction into which he had fallen. He was not a talkative man, and it was an unconscious relief to him that Cuckoo did not demand a constant flow of conversation. He liked sitting in the car by her, watching her, thinking about her. No thought of the future was in his mind; the present was good and, orientally, it satisfied him.

It was evening—the early evening of a winter's day—when they reached town. As they came to Grosvenor Square, Fabricius spoke.

"Shall we drive straight to the house?" he asked.

Cuckoo was taken by surprise and had to collect her thoughts before answering him; then, deciding that the time was not yet ripe to risk her aunt's discovery of her increasing intimacy with her cousin, she answered simply, "No," and he stopped the car. He looked at her sharply as they stood together on the curb. They had never discussed the necessity for keeping Lady Fabricius in ignorance of their friendship, but they both knew.

"I'm dining out," he said slowly, "but I'll go to the Club before I come to dress. Will you be up when I come in?"

She held out her hand.

"No, not tonight, Bertie. I'm going to see Agatha Kenyon for a few minutes now, and I shall probably dine with her and come home and go to bed early; I'm tired."

A look of displeasure, seeming almost physically to blacken his face, came into his eyes; the thick lips protruded a little.

"Very well," he said shortly. "Good-bye," and he walked off towards Park Lane.

A slight fog had blown up with the coming of the evening. It was warmer and the air was heavy. Cuckoo turned off and walked towards Bruton Street, where Mrs. Kenyon lived. Bertie's ill-temper by no means disheartened her as it might have done two years before. She took it for what it was, and it gave her a little pang of triumph. He would miss her tonight and tomorrow might be rich in happenings.

As she left Grosvenor Square, a hansom came round the corner, and over the apron of it leaned George Loxley. He stopped the cab at once and joined her, although she had bowed and was walking resolutely away.

"Cuckoo," he said, "why didn't you come the other day? I waited for over an hour."

"I—I found I couldn't," she returned. "It was quite impossible."

"But you said you would."

"My dear George, I have said I would do lots of things and then didn't do them." He looked pale and tired; her heart smote her as his troubled eyes held hers.

"Look here, George," she said earnestly, drawing a step nearer to him in the falling darkness. "It's no use, you know. I'm not going to marry you, and there's not a bit of use our being together."

"There is just as much use," he returned slowly, the end of his nose giving a little jerk, "as there is in food for hungry people, Cuckoo."

She laughed nervously. "I admire your simile. That's just the trouble—I can't and won't be a hungry person."

"Do you really mean then that you want never to see me again?"

She paused for a moment before answering, and it seemed that she was really and seriously considering the question.

"Yes," she said, "I think I do mean that."

He flushed, a deep red that stained his cheeks irregularly.

"How can you?" he asked, with simplicity, "when you love me?" And then, for their future weal or woe, she blurted out the truth:

"I'm going to marry somebody—else," she said. "Somebody who is rich—so now you know."

He had known that for the past two years, but he did not say so.

"Are you engaged now?" he asked, his color fading.

It had begun to rain a little, and as he spoke he turned up his coat collar.

"Oh, no, not exactly, but—I have made up my mind."

"Cuckoo, don't decide just yet. You are wrong about

money; it isn't nearly so necessary as you think. I have sold two pictures already, and I believe I really am going to paint fairly well some day. Give me a year's grace."

She shook her head.

"No. It's perfect nonsense. I know what I want. I'm not like some girls, I really *do* know. I've always wanted the same thing. Now George, please let me go. Don't try to see me again. It's—it's just a waste of time."

She never forgot his face as it bent towards her in the wet gloom.

"If you really mean that, Cuckoo," he said. "I've nothing more to say."

"I do mean it." After a minute he drew back.

"Then good-bye," he said formally, "and I hope that you will be very happy."

He raised his hat and passed her, disappearing round the corner.

For quite half a minute she stood perfectly still, and then, as an empty hansom passed her, she hailed it, but she did not go to Bruton Street.

Lady Rachel Jackson lived over a chemist's shop in a small maisonette, whose supplementary postal address was Belgrave Square. Cuckoo rang at the little door next to the chemist's window, and waited. She waited a long time, for it is more difficult to live near Belgrave Square on a very limited income than it is to live further afield, and Rachel, at least, was obliged to make up the difference in the number and quality of her servants. Cuckoo stood at the top of the steps looking up and down the depressing street. If she had been a fool half an hour ago, she would have turned her boat's nose towards a harbor less smart even than this, for George could not have afforded Alington Street. She was glad she had been

strong and sensible, and with a determined shake of her head, she pulled the bell a second time.

The very stars in their courses were fighting that afternoon for Hubert Fabricius.

Cuckoo had come to see Rachel on purpose to confirm herself, by the sight of Rachel's poverty, in the belief that she had been wise in refusing to marry George, but the stellar intervention was made visible the moment the door opened. Instead of the usual smartly-dressed maid, who, not unsuccessfully, tried to look on such occasions as if she had never heard of the kitchen, the door was opened by a charwoman, and the charwoman was not quite sober; from upstairs came the miserable wailing of children's voices, and there were unmistakable signs of a quite unusual degree of domestic discomfort in the little house.

Yes, her ladyship was upstairs, she was in her bedroom. The nurse had gone. Would the lady walk up? The lady walked up the tiny staircase, and found Rachel in a room hardly too large for a properly developed parrot. She was sitting by the fire, her face swollen with crying, a bad-tempered baby on each arm, for she had accentuated her indiscretion in marrying Mr. Jackson by presenting him with twins at the end of the first year.

"Oh, Nicky, I *am* glad to see you," Mr. Jackson's wife exclaimed. "I can't get up; they are in the most disgusting tempers. They are both getting their nasty little teeth, and Nurse has gone because Alison scolded her for being out late when we were going out to dine, and it made us late, and Lady Harrow was furious, and everything's perfectly beastly."

Cuckoo sat down and unfastened her furs. A sense of perfect satisfaction had come over her.

"Which is Prunella and which is Yvette?"

"Oh, *I* don't know," gasped the exasperated mother. "It got so cold I had to put their jackets on, and I can't

see the ribbons without taking them off. It's a perfect nuisance; they get more alike every day."

Cuckoo touched one of the babies gingerly on the cheek. "This is the pink-ribbon one," she said. "I can see through the jacket."

"Oh, then that's Yvette. Oh, Cuckoo, what a nice coat and skirt! I've not a thing to wear. Prunella clawed the ink all over us both when I'd my only decent skirt on the other day. I suppose a baby of eight months' old can't be really malicious, but sometimes it does seem as if Prunella was. Yvette is much more amiable."

Both children had stopped crying by this time, and the two girls could talk in comfort. Things were going badly for Rachel; even Alison's perfections, it appeared, had lost something of their pristine charm. He was working in a Government office and hardly ever came home to lunch; not because he didn't want to, but because it was cheaper for him to get it at some restaurant, and then he was so tired at night that he was cross.

"Exactly," commented Cuckoo unconsciously, but with conviction.

"What did you say?" asked Rachel, surprised.

But Cuckoo changed the subject. She didn't stay long; she had kept her cab waiting, and as she left her friend and went downstairs, the smell of dinner pervaded the cramped and ridiculously narrow passage; it seemed to her to be the symbolic scent of smart poverty. She drove home as if she had been Cleopatra on her barge, feeling rich and full of wisdom.

CHAPTER XIX

A FEW days later Lady Fabricius gave a large dinner-party, and Cuckoo, who was very alert to anything that affected herself, knew that she was in some way or other involved in her aunt's unusual interest in the mild festivity. Aunt Marcia was very particular about flowers, which, as a rule, she was not disposed to be lavish with; Aunt Marcia's maid had also been sent in great haste to Bond Street to fetch the new frock that her ladyship wished to wear, and which for some reason threatened to be late.

"Why don't you wear black velvet, Aunt Marcia?" Cuckoo asked, as they lingered over their tea. Lady Fabricius coughed.

"M'm! both my black velvets have lost their freshness," she returned, "and Bertie doesn't like me in black."

"I do," said Cuckoo bluntly, "it makes you look so much thinner."

Lady Fabricius was well over seventy, and Cuckoo was only twenty, but Lady Fabricius answered as if they had been exactly the same age.

"Can't *you* wear that last frock—the yellow one from Veinard's, my dear? It makes you look really much plumper."

"Who are coming?" Cuckoo asked, taking the veiled reference to her bony structure with impenetrable phlegm.

"Oh, nobody in particular—Lord and Lady Harrow, the Bartons, Sir Charles Mowbray," the old lady paused; her little eyes moved restlessly about. "Oh, yes—Lord

and Lady Thorsway and their girl, and that man Hathersage, who writes novels."

Cuckoo stirred her third cup of tea reflectively, her face bent, her keen gaze hidden from her aunt by her eyebrows. Lady Fabricius, a huge, shapeless mass, bulging and boiling over the edges of her chair, had her back to the window, and Cuckoo could barely see her face, but at the girl's next remark, she could just perceive her aunt's change of expression.

"He's a Marquis, isn't he, Lord Thorsway? And isn't the girl very tall and fair and pale?"

"H'm, yes; it is one of the oldest peerages in England."

"I suppose," Cuckoo said, in a very idle voice, "they are going to try and marry her to Bertie?"

Lady Fabricius started, rippling in her chair.

"My dear child, what a very vulgar thing to say! How should they try to marry their daughter to Bertie; although"—she added, in her voice the irresistible pride it always held when she spoke of her son, "why shouldn't they?"

Cuckoo rose, yawning politely.

"I don't know, I'm sure. I was just wondering if you would like her for a daughter-in-law." And then, without waiting for an answer, she hastily excused herself and went upstairs. Her aunt was neither very clever nor very reserved, and the chances are that she might, in default of anybody better, have confided her plan to her niece, and this, although the girl had no idea of allowing the plan to mature, and was fully bent on distressing her aunt by marrying the desirable Bertie herself, she couldn't quite have borne.

She knew Lady Mary Thorsway a little, and admired her looks immensely. Lady Mary was six feet tall, and as white, and flexible, and slim as a peeled willow wand. She was a silent creature, and though Cuckoo knew that

this was because she was dull, she did not make the mistake of expecting other people, especially men, thus to read her lack of volubility. There is great charm in the silence of a very beautiful woman, and the plain and unsilent Cuckoo knew it. So *that* was Aunt Marcia's game —nothing but the daughter of a Marquis was good enough for her beautiful boy!

Cuckoo dressed for dinner and went downstairs in a condition, so successfully described by the French, of having *le diable au corps.*

She wore the yellow gown, and she also wore a high color that was perfectly natural, and there was a brilliant light in her strange little eyes. For two or three days she had hardly seen her cousin, but he had sent her flowers that afternoon, and she wore a few of them. He was waiting by the fire in the big drawing-room.

"Hallo," he said, when she came in, "what's the matter? What makes you look like that?"

"Aha! I've a secret." He came close to her, his bloodshot eyes full of admiration.

"You imp! What's your secret?"

"What would you say," she retorted gaily, "if I should tell you that 'a marriage has been arranged!'" She said it partly to tease, partly to test him, but at the sudden dark flush that came up his face, and the queer, childish pout of his lips, she realized the value of her words.

"Who's going to be married?" he asked. "It's *you*, Cuckoo. Tell me, are you engaged?" He caught her roughly by the wrist, and she noticed that he had been drinking.

"Don't be rude, Bertie. I never said I was going to be married, but if I were that is no reason why you should hurt my arm."

But Fabricius' jealousy was all afire.

"Cuckoo," he stammered, "don't tease me; you—you can't be engaged; it's some nonsense of mother's, isn't it now?"

To Cuckoo's great relief Lady Fabricius' lift was at that moment heard arriving on the landing, and Bertie, without a word, left the room.

Cuckoo went in to dinner with the novelist, an agreeable, absent-minded man, very well pleased with the episode in the drawing-room. Things were coming her way, and coming rapidly; even Lady Mary looked less lovely than usual, and Cuckoo perceived with great satisfaction that Bertie, who sat by her, was silent and distrait.

"He'll be wondering who my man is," she thought. "I wish to goodness Captain Browne had been here, or anyone who knew how to flirt. This old creature's perfectly hopeless."

Cuckoo did not know it, but it was, for her plan, just as well that some flirtatiously inclined man was not beside her at dinner, for she was not a flirt by nature, and flirting is an art that can't be acquired. Even the rather thick-skulled Bertie Fab must have seen through her clumsy efforts in that direction. As it was, she had the satisfaction after dinner of seeing her cousin make straight for her when the men went through the ancient and honorable ceremonial of joining the ladies.

Bertie had been drinking pretty freely of his father's very best champagne, but he was one of those delightful men whose tempers grow the worse, the more they drink, and his mood, as he plumped down on the sofa beside her, was almost to be characterized by the word dangerous. His face was brutally red and his unsuitable violet eyes blazed at her.

"Look here, Cuckoo," he said. "I want to have a talk with you."

"Fire away," she answered lazily, unfurling the fan he had sent her two years ago.

"I don't mean now. I mean after these damn people have gone. Never saw such a dinner-party. Never was so bored in my life. Stupid owl of a woman, that tall girl in blue."

At that moment one of the footmen came up.

"Sir George Porter wishes to speak to you on the telephone, Miss," he said, "and I was to say it is very important."

Cuckoo seized her opportunity like lightning, and rose.

"Oh," she said, with a little affectation of confusion, which was extremely well done, "I'll be back in a minute, Bertie." And she went to the telephone, to be told by a perfectly indifferent young man that the matinée party he had planned for the next day must, for some reason, be put off.

Cuckoo knew that she left Hubert Fabricius fuming with rage and jealousy about poor Sir George Porter, who had invited her to his party for the sole reason that she was the friend of a young married woman with whom he was very much in love. When she came back to the drawing-room Bertie met her at the door.

"Who's this fellow?" he asked, "at the telephone, I mean."

"Sir George Porter? I don't know who he *is*—he's just Sir George Porter. Bertie, your mother wants you, she's beckoning."

He scowled.

"Well, will you come to the library to-night after they've gone?"

"I can't," she said. "I'm tired, and besides, it will be so late."

He was just drunk enough to be obstinate. "Then you've got to talk to me now."

At the other end of the room Cuckoo could see her aunt's face flushed and distorted with vexation and, it seemed to the girl, dawning suspicion. The time was not ripe for her aunt to know.

"Look here, Bertie," she said hurriedly, "you must go to your mother; and pull yourself together, for goodness' sake. If you'll do *whatever* Aunt Marcia wants you to now, and be very agreeable—mind you, she's looking at us, and is cross—I'll come to the library tonight."

His face cleared a little, and, making a visible effort, he composed his face, steadied his muscles, and went to his mother. Two minutes later he was sitting talking to Lady Mary, and Cuckoo made herself useful by amusing a very tall man who had been asked at the last minute to fill a vacant place.

Lord and Lady Thorsway, quiet, rather dowdy, middle-aged people, were the first to go, and by eleven o'clock, even the tall young man—who naturally, being only a stop-gap, had stayed to the last, as they always do—had gone.

Lady Fabricius was radiant, for Bertie, stimulated by Cuckoo's promise, at which his vinous condition had suddenly changed for the better, had devoted himself very markedly to his as markedly neglected dinner-companion. Lady Mary was, moreover, so truly delightful to behold, that no man, even half-drunk and wholly in love with someone else, could fail to enjoy looking at her. She was gentle, and unaffected, and sweet-tempered, so her charm, of course, was a close-range one, and Bertie was not nearly so bored as he had expected to be. So now his mother drew him down to the sofa, where she sat, hideous and jewel-bedecked like some old idol. She beamed with satisfaction and took his hand in hers.

"Very pleasant evening, wasn't it, my darling boy?"

"Very," he agreed.

She had the primitive wisdom of making no direct reference to the object of her little plot, but she had a pleasant word for each of the other guests, and Bertie joined in dutifully. Sir Adolph, who looked rather as if one of his liver attacks were coming on, said nothing. He looked very small and remarkably frog-like and very old, Cuckoo decided, as he sat a little apart from the others, smoking one of the huge cigars in which he so delighted.

"How perfectly beautiful Lady Mary is!" Cuckoo said. Sir Adolph eyed her sharply.

"She's better than beautiful," he said; "she looks good, and kind and—and straightforward, Cuckoo."

Cuckoo returned his glance, and something in his face gave her a little shock. There were moments when it depressed her to have so clear-sighted an uncle.

"Nice girl," Bertie agreed; "particularly nice girl, I thought."

"I always feel," Lady Fabricius remarked, as she bade Cuckoo fetch her stick and ring the bell for the lift to be prepared for her upward flight, "that there is, after all, a great deal to be said for really fine blood. I suppose there are no people in England of more unblemished descent than Lord and Lady Thorsway. She was a daughter of the Duke of Cheshire, and they were pure Saxon——"

Leaving this pleasant barb, as she thought, to sink into her son's heart, the old lady said good-night to him at the door of the lift, Cuckoo, as usual, going up with her. The last the young girl saw as they ascended was her uncle's wise, ugly face, and it was troubled and its trouble troubled her. He had, she knew, smelt a rat.

At the second floor stood Rowland, Lady Fabricius' maid, waiting for her, and leaning on her arm, the old lady waddled slowly along to her room, Cuckoo following

meekly behind. In front of the dressing-table was a specially built, very large chair that turned on a pivot, like those in offices. Thus Lady Fabricius sat down with her back to the mirror, and when she had raised her tiny feet from the ground, Rowland swung her round facing it. The old lady looked at herself and heaved a deep sigh of genuine satisfaction.

The evening had been successful, she thought, and even Cuckoo, whom fundamentally she did not like, had behaved well.

"You look very nice, my dear," she declared as her maid took off her necklace and her sagging, ruinous old neck was revealed in all its horrors. "I think the new chef does very well, don't you?"

"I don't know," Cuckoo answered truthfully, "I never noticed what I ate, but it seemed all right. Bertie stuffed."

"I thought just at first," her aunt went on, "that Bertie was bored, but I don't believe he was."

"No one would have thought so," Cuckoo answered with care, "to see him talking to Lady Mary after dinner."

Lady Fabricius, who was now wrapped in a dressing-gown, and whose head was being denuded of its wealth of hair, gave a little chuckle.

"Oh, you noticed that, did you?"

Cuckoo retreated in order, for she did not wish any confidences. Her one object was to allay any suspicion her aunt might have had of her.

"Mr. Hathersage was very amusing," she said. "He's been in the North Country and loves the moors. By the way, Aunt Marcia, did I tell you I'd had a letter from Aunt Flora? Aunt Effie's much better, but Dr. Dawes sent for a specialist from York, and he said she must go away where it's warmer; so they are starting for Bournemouth next week."

"Can they afford Bournemouth?" said Lady Fabricius, not in the least unkindly; but her remark irritated Cuckoo.

"They can afford Bournemouth because they are going to visit some *friends;* Lady Didcot, who was Aunt Effie's pupil, you know, has invited them."

"How very nice." Aunt Marcia took off her rings and laid them on the table amongst the ivory and silver trappings.

Cuckoo looked round the room with a very odd feeling. It might so possibly come one day to be her room. If it ever did, she thought, without any ill-will towards her aunt, she'd turn the head of the bed round so that it would not look into the light, *and* she would not have a crimson carpet!

"Well, my dear, give me a kiss and say good-night. I'm very tired, and you look pale."

Cuckoo gave the outer coating of her aunt's face a very gingerly peck, and nodding to the maid, left the room.

She went upstairs to her own room for a moment and sat in front of her own dressing-table, gazing absently at herself in the glass. She was very tired and would have liked to go to bed, but there was work afoot. So after a minute she rose with a little sigh, and, giving her white cheeks a hard pinch, ran her tongue out at herself in disgust at her own ugliness, and then went quietly and swiftly downstairs.

As she reached the library door she paused, startled, and then, as the door opened, stepped quickly behind a figure in beautiful damascened Florentine armor that stood to the left of it.

"Well, I thought I'd better just tell you," Sir Adolph was saying as he stood for a moment at the foot of the stairs. "I'm glad I was wrong, for your mother would never have heard of it, and what she says," he added, with

quiet emphasis, looking up at his son, "*goes*, you know."

Bertie laughed.

"Cuckoo's a dear little thing," he returned carelessly, "and I like her, but you needn't have worried about my intending to marry her. Such an idea never entered my head."

As it happened, this statement was an unqualified lie, but Cuckoo naturally could not know it and she stood in her black corner rigid and breathless with the most violent anger she had ever in her life felt. If thoughts could have killed, that moment would have been Bertie Fab's last, but they can't, and the two men shook hands undisturbed.

"Good-night, my boy. Don't stay up late, and remember what I told you about that champagne. It's very good, but it's stronger than you know."

"I'll remember, sir," the younger man answered with restrained impatience. "I'll just write my letter in the library and send one of the men out to post it—it's a rather important one——"

"Good-night."

"Good-night."

Cuckoo listened while the two sets of footsteps died away into the silence—her uncle's on the upper landing, and her cousin's as he closed the library door. She didn't move, for she knew what Bertie would do next, and he did it. Two minutes later he came out in his stockinged feet, a bit of paper in his hand, and went noiselessly up the stairs. When he had again gone into the library she in turn went up, past her uncle's door, and up another flight to her own room. With a ferocious scowl, she picked up the slip of paper he had pushed under her door and read it.

Don't come down for about half an hour [he had written]. The Pater has been a little tiresome. I'll turn out the light in

the hall when the men have gone to bed, and that will be the signal that everything's all right. I am longing to see you, you little devil.

BERTIE.

Cuckoo opened her window and sat down by it. It was a bitterly cold night, but she was not cold. So her cousin had no intention of marrying her and had just been amusing himself. She looked out into the star-pierced darkness, her small face set in lines that would have done credit to one of the Borgias.

"I'll get even with him for that," she muttered between closely shut teeth. "I'll punish him for that—oh, *how* I'll punish him!"

It is rather remarkable, considering her youth, that she had so much wisdom that her first step towards the punishment of the man who had so bitterly wounded her pride was to lock her door, undress, and go to bed.

Bertie Fab waited downstairs for nearly two hours, and then, comforting himself with flagons, but in a towering rage, went up to his room.

CHAPTER XX

Brighton,
December 23rd.

DEAR AUNT MARCIA,

The two days' sea air have done me a world of good and my cold is almost gone, and Phil and Rosie say I actually look fatter, which will delight you. I am sorry I can't get back tonight as I wired you, but Rosie was having some people dine with her and really needed me, whereas you won't really care much if I don't grace your party with my beauteous presence.

I shall be back by six, and am so excited about my new frock!

My love to Uncle Adolph and you.

CUCKOO.

Brighton,
December 23rd.

DEAREST RACHEL,

I hope you understood my telegram. I could not make it any clearer as it was raining and I couldn't go out myself to send it, and I couldn't wait to let you know the good news. It is *really* true, and we are going to be married just after the New Year. You were perfectly right in saying that he had not meant what he said to Uncle Adolph about not wanting to marry me. Uncle Adolph had smelt a rat and warned him off me, so to speak, and he was naturally keeping things pleasant. He was furious with me for having thought he meant it, and I suppose I was rather a beast. However, it doesn't matter now, and I am so happy I don't know what to do. Of course there is bound to be a frightful row; the Fabs are going to be

furious, and it isn't nice to insist on being the daughter of people who loathe having you. But we shall go away at once, for he hates a row even worse than I do, and of course it will blow over. Uncle Adolph wouldn't mind much, poor old darling, only he is so utterly under auntie's stern thumb that he will back her up and repudiate and cast us both off. Bertie has four thousand pounds a year of his own already. His father has always put money aside for him, and some years ago he did some speculating thing and settled the results on Bertie at once. Four thousand pounds a year would seem genteel poverty to Rosie, but, after all, it's better than a poke in the eye with a muddy stick. I haven't told Rosie because, though she is a darling, she does chatter, and Bertie doesn't strike me as being one of the valiant ones of the earth, and I am sure if auntie found out in time and made herself sufficiently nasty, my beloved would back down. However, I really don't mind him so much as I thought I should, but I shall have to check the brandy habit. Of course, he never gets really drunk, but I do hate the smell. He has promised me a house in town and a villa somewhere near Monte Carlo. I hate Monte Carlo myself, but I do love the Riviera.

He's given me an engagement ring, and it's a perfect love, a single Marquise diamond; I am wearing it round my neck for the present! Am I not romantic!

I suppose you really, in your heart, think me a perfect beast, Ray dear, and I suppose I am. I should hate any other girl who deliberately went to work to marry a man for whom she didn't care a button, just for his money, but I was always like that and I always knew I should have to have money. There are so many things that seem luxuries even to rich people and are not luxuries to me at all—just sheer necessities. I know you adore Alison, and how nice he is, but I could never live in that little house and be happy. I have such a beast of a nature that I should simply hate the man who made me; so don't think me too dreadful. I'm going home to-morrow for Christmas and to get together a few rags of decent clothes. We are going to Paris, but I don't want to start without something new. I'm frightened to death lest he should give it away before it is over. Poor old thing, he's really ridiculously in love with me.

Well, Rosie wants me to go out with her, so good-bye.

Love to the twins and Alison, and a great deal to your dear old self.

From

CUCKOO.

P.S.—I really am perfectly happy. It seems almost too good to be true. My "bundle of myrrh" is coming to meet me at Victoria, but we will part after the first raptures are over! and I shall go home alone.

Cuckoo had really had a cold, as the result of her night of rage and indignation over her cousin's supposed perfidy, and it had pulled her down to such a degree that three days at Brighton, suggested by Lady Rosamund Brinkley, were advisable as well as pleasant. It was, moreover, the easiest way out of the very dangerous situation in which she found herself, after accepting her cousin's turbulent and imperative proposal. There was danger in every moment that the two were in the presence of either of the old people, for Bertie was an emotional man and he was, moreover, proud of his disinterested love for his cousin. He knew how strongly his mother would object to the marriage; he had always been afraid of his mother and, in an odd, innocent sort of way, he saw himself in the light of a martyr, almost in the light of a figure in high romance. His German blood inclined him to small, physical demonstrations; in his soul he would have liked to sit on the sofa and hold Cuckoo's hand whenever they were together. He had a most perilous trick of kissing her on the stairs, or behind a just closed door, and his eyes were heavy with caresses.

For two days the girl hadn't a comfortable moment, and when finally, after a hairbreadth escape from the vigilant eye of Sir Adolph, her strained nerves showed themselves in the form of a violent headache and touch of fever, Rosie's invitation fell like manna from heaven. She stayed several days in Brighton, and Bertie had written

with Teutonic fidelity every one of the days; besides sending telegrams of an unmistakably amorous nature several times.

This way of expressing his devotion irked Cuckoo to boredom, but besides annoying her it caused her a subtler and more respectable emotion, something remotely akin to the shame with which she should have been filled. She was ready to take the Fabricius money, but it would have been much easier for her if Bertie had not so sincerely cared for her. At times, after reading certain of his letters, she almost hated him for his obvious sincerity and good intentions for the future.

As her train steamed into Victoria Station, this feeling of irritability was very strong, and when Fabricius met her, something in his face really gave her a pang.

"My goodness, Bertie," she said, "don't look like that; everybody's staring at you."

"I don't care. You look better, darling. Oh, I *am* so glad to see you."

Barring George, he was the only man who had ever made love to her, and she wished, as many a woman has wished before, that the words of one lover did not so irresistibly remind her of the words of another.

On the way to the Club where she was to drop him she said, suddenly drawing back from his embrace, "Now listen, Bertie. It's all your wish that we are keeping our engagement a secret until afterwards. I shouldn't have minded telling them and facing it out, but you didn't want to——"

"I could see no sense in doing so. You know what mother would be," he returned sulkily.

"Oh, that's all right—no more can I. But there is no good in our trying to keep it a secret if you are going to give it away by looking at me like that."

"You oughtn't to blame me for looking at you as if I

love you," he protested, not unreasonably, and she hastened to smooth his ruffled feelings.

"Look at me just as you like when we're alone—dear," she said quickly; "but do be careful before your mother and father, then everything will be all right."

Such as he was, he was deeply and honorably in love with her, and after a moment he promised to do his best to fulfill her wishes.

"Although," he added, "when you stick out your funny little jaw and that dimple comes twinkling in your face, I can't help just adoring you." He kissed her. "I've found out about the special license, and the man I told you of at that city church will marry us and we can catch the one o'clock train for Paris. This is Tuesday, and it will be for Saturday morning."

In spite of herself, Cuckoo gave a start.

"I thought—I thought we were going to wait till after the New Year," she protested, a dreadful feeling of irrevocability weakening her voice.

He laughed softly. "No, my dear. No time like the present, and the sooner it is done the sooner we can come home for that fatted calf."

The cab had stopped at the Club, and after kissing her again, he left her.

"I shall come in in about an hour's time," he said. "Please wear some of the flowers I am going to send you. I've got you a ripping Christmas present."

Cuckoo's eyes twinkled. "What is it?" she coaxed, leaning out of the cab.

"No, I won't tell you, you baggage. It is to be a surprise, but it's a beauty——"

When she reached South Audley Street, Almond opened the door and told her that her ladyship and Sir Adolph were in the library and wished her to go to them at once.

She nodded. "All right, Almond." Taking off her coat

and veil, she went to the library just as she was.

"Hallo, dears," she cried gaily, running in. Then she stopped, looking from one to another of the two faces before her. They knew.

"Sit down," said her aunt. Cuckoo sat down and unfastened her gloves. The game was up. She felt it in the marrow of her bones, but she was not without courage and her blood warmed to battle. After all, Almond, or Frederick, or that foxy-faced Walter, whom she had never liked, must have seen something and told. Oh, what a *fool* Bertie was!

"What's the matter, Aunt Marcia?" she asked, very distinctly.

"The matter is," burst out Lady Fabricius, stammering with overwhelming anger, "that we've found you out, you——"

Then Sir Adolph raised his hand.

"Be quiet, Marcia." Never in his life had he so spoken to her, and the old woman was hushed. Cuckoo turned to her uncle, and even at that awful moment could not help paying him the tribute of a strong admiration for the look of power and dignity in his grotesquely ugly face.

"The matter is," he said slowly, "that you have been planning to marry our son without our knowledge or consent."

"Bertie has asked me to marry him, certainly," she returned steadily. Then she broke off and turned to the door.

"It's our son coming in," Sir Adolph explained. "There was a telephone message for him at his Club. We of course knew that he would meet you and that you would drop him there before coming home——"

The door opened as he finished speaking, and Bertie came in.

"Hullo!" he burst out. "What's up?" Then he saw,

and without a moment's hesitation he went and stood by Cuckoo.

"I suppose you've found out about our engagement."

His father looked at him, an odd look of pity in his face. Cuckoo quailed.

"I have sent for you, Hubert," the old man said slowly, "to tell you something that will make you very unhappy."

All her life Cuckoo was glad that when his father said this, Bertie took hold of her hand and drew her close to him.

"It won't make me unhappy, Father," he said. "For no matter what you may say I am going to marry Cuckoo."

Cuckoo pushed him away. "Oh, don't!" she said. "Please let me go. I don't want to discuss this matter and I'll go to Roseroofs at once."

"What on earth are you all talking about?" burst out Bertie, losing his patience, his dull red flush mounting in his face.

"You can tell him," Cuckoo said rapidly to her uncle. "How you found out, I don't know, but I'm not going to stop and hear you talk about it."

"Don't be a fool, Cuckoo; it doesn't in the least matter, their having found out. It was my fault that we didn't tell them in the beginning——"

But old Sir Adolph again raised his hand, with that peculiar, un-English gesture.

"As to how we found out, Cuckoo," he said slowly, "you yourself told us."

"*I* told you?"

Sir Adolph drew from his pocket his shabby old spectacle-case, and with great deliberation planted his spectacles upon his nose. Then he put his hand to his pocket —and Cuckoo knew.

"Oh, I see," she said very rapidly. "I mixed my letters to Aunt Marcia and Rachel Jackson. Read him the

letter if you like, but I'm going to tell him. It's this, Bertie. I wanted to marry you because—you are rich. And Rachel *knew*, and when you asked me to marry you I wrote and told her all about it. I wish you wouldn't listen to the letter; it will hurt you, and I'm very—well, very proud of the way you have just behaved. I—I'm glad," she went on, running her words together, a blaze of color in her cheeks. "I'm glad for your sake that they found out. I think if I'd known that you were—were —what I know now, I couldn't have been so horrid. Good-bye. Good-bye, Aunt Marcia. Good-bye, Uncle Adolph."

She turned to the door, and then came her downfall. Bertie stepped quickly in front of her and stood with his back to the door.

"Read the letter, Father," he said, "or give it to me. You've got to listen, Cuckoo."

He stood there, barring the door, his big head lowered, his heavy shoulders lurching forward, his jaw set; looking, in his anger and amazement, much finer and more manly than any one had ever seen him look—and in an unbroken silence Sir Adolph Fabricius read aloud the letter Cuckoo had written to Rachel Jackson.

"Dearest Rachel,

"I hope you understood my telegram. I could not make it any clearer as it was raining, so I couldn't go out myself to send it and couldn't wait to let you know the good news. It is *really* true, and we are going to be married just after the New Year. You were perfectly right in saying that he had not meant what he said to Uncle Adolph about not wanting to marry me. Uncle Adolph had smelt a rat and warned him off me, so to speak, and he was naturally keeping things pleasant.

"He was furious with me for having thought he meant it, and I suppose I was rather a beast. However, it doesn't matter now, and I am so happy I don't know what to do——"

Bertie's face relaxed at this point, and he made a slight movement towards Cuckoo. But Sir Adolph raised his prominent, light, masterful eyes for a moment, and his son did not stir from the door.

"Of course there is bound to be a frightful row; the Fabs are going to be furious, and it isn't nice to insist on being the daughter of people who loathe you. . . . Uncle Adolph wouldn't mind much, poor old darling, only he is so utterly under auntie's stern thumb that he will back her up and repudiate and cast us both off. Bertie has four thousand pounds a year of his own already. . . . Four thousand pounds would seem genteel poverty to Rosie, but, after all, it's better than a poke in the eye with a muddy stick——"

Cuckoo dared not look at Bertie while this was being read; her face was like a little mask, her eyes nearly closed. Sir Adolph read on, his voice monotonous and regular as if he were reading the minutes of some dull board meeting.

"I haven't told Rosie because, though she is a darling, she does chatter, and Bertie doesn't strike me as being one of the valiant ones of the earth, and I am sure if auntie found out in time and made herself sufficiently nasty my beloved would back down . . ."

Sir Adolph raised his eyelids and looked fixedly at Cuckoo as he read these words. She returned his gaze with a curious detached steadiness. Then she looked at her aunt, and a little shudder passed over her; her aunt, she knew, would be very dreadful. Sir Adolph had paused, but nobody spoke, and he read on:

"However, I really don't mind him so much as I thought I should, but I shall have to check the brandy habit. Of course, he never gets really drunk, but I do hate the smell . . ."

At this Hubert Fabricius came towards his father with clenched fists.

"That's enough," he said hoarsely. "Quite enough."

Sir Adolph bowed and put the letter back in his pocket.

"I thought it would be," he said quietly.

Suddenly Cuckoo saw that the door was open, and her cousin standing to one side. Grateful to him for his forbearance, she was about to leave the room, when her aunt's voice arrested her. What Lady Fabricius, with her undisciplined temper, her outraged vanity and her natural anger for her son's sake, said to her dead sister's daughter need not be told. She was so violent, so ruthless, so vulgar in her unbridled hatred and spite, that none of the three could think of anything to say that would stop her. Sir Adolph listened horror-stricken but helpless, and Bertie, after the first minute of the invective, walked to the window and stood looking out into the early night.

Cuckoo turned and faced her aunt, her position, of course, vastly improved by her aunt's break-down. Finally, when the old woman stopped, literally because she couldn't breathe, Cuckoo spoke.

"I'm very sorry, Bertie," she said, "that I've hurt you, and I'm sorry that I've hurt Uncle Adolph, and I can respect your anger, but as for Aunt Marcia, I am glad she knows from my letter how I feel about her. It is perfectly true that you bully Uncle Adolph, and he has the patience of an angel, and everybody knows it. You've given me clothes, but the money which you settled on me because I am my mother's daughter was not your money at all—it was Uncle Adolph's, and I'm not a bit grateful to *you* for it.

"Perhaps Bertie will one day forgive me, but I will never forgive you. I'm ashamed that you are my aunt. I *am* a schemer, and a plotter—whatever you like—but I'm ashamed of being your niece."

She marched out of the room and upstairs. It seemed to her in her anger—anger which had utterly swept from

her mind all feeling of disappointment about Bertie—that she couldn't live another minute in her aunt's house.

"I shall go straight back to Roseroofs." Hastily packing her dressing-case with the things necessary for one night, she drank a glass of water to steady herself and started towards the door.

Roseroofs! But the aunts were leaving—had left that very day—for Bournemouth, and Esther Oughtenshaw, she knew, had gone away as well. Moreover, she had no money—only five or six shillings at most and Rosamund Brinkley, the only person to whom she could have gone to borrow a little, was in Brighton.

After all, she was only twenty and she stood still in the middle of the room, sick with fright. What *should* she do? Even her uncle, she knew, would never forgive what she had said to her aunt, and she would die rather than see Bertie again.

Suddenly she saw, on a little table by the window, a large square parcel in thick brown paper. Hardly realizing what she was doing, she read the address. It was in George's writing. She could hardly have been more surprised if the heavens had opened and one of the Saints had bent down to help her. *George!*

Tearing open the paper she saw what it was. It was a small, careful painting of Roseroofs in the early Spring, in a plain gold frame. In one corner there was a note.

DEAR CUCKOO [the note said],

I shall do as you ask and not try to see you again, but this is Christmas and you must let me send you the present I had prepared for you; for I do want you to be happy. I shall always love you, and no matter where I am, I will always come to do any mortal thing for you that I can.

GEORGE.

She stared at the letter for a moment, then she laughed aloud. There was his address at the corner of the paper:

16A, Barker Street,
Chelsea.

Taking the picture under her arm, she went quietly downstairs. Almond was in the hall, as servants seem to have the knack of being at crucial moments.

"Call me a cab, will you?" Cuckoo said, nearly composing her voice to its usual tone.

"Very good, miss."

The man went outside to blow his whistle, and at that moment Bertie came out of the library.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

Cuckoo didn't answer for fear of being melodramatic.

Bertie Fab was obviously shaken; his large face was white, and the flesh looked loose on the bones.

"Cuckoo," he said awkwardly, "you mustn't go off like this. I am very sorry my mother spoke as she did."

To her horrified amazement, Cuckoo burst into tears as she turned to the door.

Almond still stood at the curb, blowing his whistle. Practically the two were alone.

"Don't cry," Fabricius said.

She turned to him.

"There's no use my asking you to forgive me," she said, trying hard to control herself. "I don't deserve it, and it would be ridiculous, for if they hadn't found out, I should never have been sorry."

"Good God," the poor fellow broke out, "neither should I!"

"But I *am* sorry I have hurt you, Bertie, and I am sorry I hurt Uncle Adolph. Don't forget that I'm sorry."

As she spoke a cab stopped at the door and she went out. After a second he followed her, and waving the

butler on one side, helped her into the vehicle, which happened to be an antediluvian "growler," and leaning his hand on the window, he answered her.

"I shall not forget," he said. "Are you quite sure, Cuckoo, that you meant it all—the letter, I mean?"

Amongst her many bad qualities was the good one of not shrinking, at another's expense, from pain.

"I am perfectly sure," she said. "I did mean it all. I was going to marry you only for your money. Tell the man to drive to Victoria Station."

He watched the cab out of sight, and after a moment went slowly up the steps. Almond had discreetly withdrawn, so he shut the door himself.

Poor Bertie Fab!

CHAPTER XXI

LADY ROSAMUND BRINKLEY knocked sharply at the window of her car, and it stopped.

"This must be the place, William," she said to the footman, doubtfully; "don't you think so?"

William knew very conclusively that it *was* the place, for he was a denizen of the lowish neighborhood himself, but having risen in the world, he chose to deny his birthplace.

"I'll just ask at that greengrocer's shop, M'lady," he returned, assuming a puzzled look, as of an explorer who has lost the path in a jungle.

Lady Rosamund sat forward, her chin in her hand, staring curiously at the sordid street and the few, depressed-looking passers-by.

Large, luxurious, two-manned limousines were not usual in Barker Street, Chelsea, and several children, whose little noses needed maternal attention, stood staring at it; a fine rain was filtering through the thick, smoke-charged air—a huge factory chimney was near, sending forth oily smoke—the houses were small, and mean, and dirty, and most of their parlor windows showed cards announcing a desire for lodgers. The car had stopped, however, not at one of these houses, but at a dingy archway leading into a courtyard, and above it stretched rows of tall, narrow windows set into a wall of blackened red bricks.

Lady Rosamund was looking for Whistler Mansions, and this dog's-eared-looking building looked like Man-

sions, or a Court—fine words count, so to speak, in the world.

William, after a few words with the greengrocer's wife, who called him Bill and gave him some hasty information about the funeral of one of his sisters, returned presently to confirm his mistress's foreboding.

"Yes, M'lady," he told her, opening the door, "it is Whistler Mansions."

She got out, refusing his professional suggestion that he should go in search of whomever she might be looking for, and disappeared under the arch.

It led into a broad asphalt courtyard, to the left of which there was a door marked Estate Office, and to the estate office the young woman tripped in her thin shoes. She was a brave soul, less pampered, despite her mercenary marriage, than Rachel, and her nerves were sound, but she shuddered a little as she went up stair after stair, following the directions of the woman in the office.

The stairs were narrow and dirty; the cheap iron of the banisters, and the concrete, gave out a loud echo under her footsteps. It was, she thought, like what a prison or a workhouse must be.

At last, out of breath, she stopped and looked in vain for a card or a name on the three doors facing her.

"It must be here," she thought. "Oh, poor, *poor* Cuckoo!"

After ringing at the middle door and receiving no answer, she tried the one to the left. As she waited, the door on the right opened suddenly and someone came out, clattering recklessly down the echoing stairs.

Rosamund turned and caught sight, at the turning, of a pale, agitated face under a soft hat.

"Good gracious," she said aloud. Then, without waiting any longer at the door where she had rung, she went

to the door out of which the man had come, and rang there.

No one answered, and she rang again. Her feet were ice-cold from the stones, which felt damp as well as cold, though of course they were not, and her teeth chattered a little. Presently she rang again, and the queer hollow silence that broods in such places, so easily to be shattered into thin echoes by any noise, remained unbroken.

She stood at the top landing of the building, and on the murky skylight over her head a heavy rain was now falling.

A thought of him whom her friends, particularly the hard-up ones, called her appalling husband, came to the young woman's mind, and it was an affectionate thought. How *frightful* to have to live in a place like this!

The silence continuing, she at length knocked on the thickly ribbed glass of the door with her knuckles. Then, shaking the handle, she called close to the keyhole.

"Cuckoo, Cuckoo, let me in! *Cuckoo*——"

After a pause she called again. "Cuckoo, let me in—it's me, Rosie!"

"Who is it?" boomed a deep, hoarse voice from behind the door.

"Rosamund Brinkley. Let me in."

Cuckoo opened the door and stood staring at her so utterly unexpected guest.

"So it's you," she said at last, in a more everyday key.

"Yes—I—I just thought I'd come to see you——"

They shook hands, and Rosamund noted in Cuckoo's face the odd kind of weariness that she had observed in the faces of poor women whom she had, through notions of charity, visited uninvited.

When Cuckoo had led the way into the large room that was evidently studio, dining-room, library and drawing-

room in one, Rosamund threw her muff into a chair and turned.

"Cuckoo," she cried, "aren't you a little glad to see me?"

Cuckoo looked at her coldly. "No," she returned, "not particularly; why should I be?"

"Would you—would you rather I went?" Rosamund stammered, feeling the most inexcusable of intruders. "I only came because—because I heard——"

Cuckoo laughed shortly. "No, I don't want you to go. Sit down and rest your legs. Those stairs must have tired them——"

Rosamund sat down, and Cuckoo went on, as she put some coals on the shabby fire, "*Why* did you say you came?"

"Because I heard—about your poor little baby."

Cuckoo turned from the fire, brushing the coal-dust from her fingers. "The baby," she answered, indifferently, "died nearly a year ago."

"I have been away over a year. We were in Japan when it happened. Oh, Cuckoo," the elder young woman broke out, "I am *so* sorry, dear."

"I am not. I'm glad."

Cuckoo sat motionless as she spoke, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes fixed vacantly on the space behind her caller.

Rosamund Brinkley was sincerely horrified, but she did not speak, for she did not know what to say.

"Did you meet George?" Cuckoo asked, after a moment. "He went out just before you came——"

"I—I saw him running downstairs. He didn't see me——"

"No, he wouldn't. I suppose you gathered we'd had a row? Well, we had. We have one every day of our lives. Jolly, isn't it?"

"Oh, Cuckoo dear——"

Cuckoo laughed again. "But never mind us. Tell me about yourself, Rosie. I really *am* glad to see you in a way, you know. How's Phil, and when did you get back?"

"We got back about six weeks ago. Phil is very well. He's going in for politics. He—really quite a lot of people—important people—want him to. He's—he's clever, you know——"

"He always was clever. And I, for one, always liked him."

Rosamund blushed suddenly. "I know you did, dear, and—I—I am so glad——"

Cuckoo eyed her for a moment, her eyes full of scrutiny. "I believe," she declared, "that you are in love with him as well!"

"Oh! How ridiculous you are—and besides, what do you mean by 'as well?' "

Cuckoo rose and, going to a dresser, took down some cups and saucers.

"I'll give you a cup of our delicious tea," she said, wearily, "and I meant that it seems you've got *everything*. The caring as well as—as the rest. That's all."

The appalling Mr. Brinkley's wife did not answer her. She was looking into the fire, a shy smile on her plump, pretty face.

Cuckoo went into the next room, and the sound of a match being struck was followed by the breathy noise of the lighting gas.

Rosamund seized the opportunity for a survey of the studio. It was a large, oblong room with a high, grimy ceiling, the walls were distempered yellow, the floor painted black.

The scant furniture was good of its kind, though inexpensive, and at the far end, under a large window, was

scattered the paraphernalia of a painter. Behind where she sat stood the dining-table, still piled with unwashed dishes. An air of neglect and indifference hung over everything; the brass candlesticks were dull, the hearth unwhitened, there was not a flower anywhere.

Beside the kitchen door, another, half open, led into the bedroom, and Rosamund could see an untidy dressing-table crowded with blurred silver and ebony things. Cuckoo, coming in with a tea-cloth, noticed the observation of her guest.

"Love's young dream, eh?" she remarked, with her short laugh; "the traditional cottage at least has a garden!"

"It's a jolly big room," Rosie protested, faintly.

"It is. Jolly is exactly the word that describes it, and George, and me! Oh, Rosie," she broke off, dropping the unfolded cloth on the little table and stretching her arms out in a gesture of wild protest, "how I loathe it. How I hate it all!"

"But, Cuckoo darling, you don't really—you *can't*, I mean; it is a nice room, and—I must send you some flowers," she concluded, "they always help."

At this inadequate climax Cuckoo burst into a real laugh and went on with her work of setting the table. "You are a funny old plutocrat," she said, "and I'd love the flowers. Even George can't object to them. George," she explained, as Rosamund opened her eyes wide, "objects to most things, but more particularly to gifts of any kind. Aunt Flora and Aunt Effie are allowed the honor and distinction of conferring benefits on His Wife (observe the capital letters in my voice!), but no one else may give that fortunate woman so much as a box of chocolates!"

"But who else *is* there?" Rosamund asked, in good faith.

Cuckoo gave her a sharp glance. "I see what you

mean. There used to be no one, of course, in the beginning, but two years have passed since Uncle Adolph was so angry, and he—he is the kindest of old men—has forgiven me long since, and—but let's have tea, even cheap tea is better than nothing—and I'll tell you properly."

Lady Rosamund of course knew of the various happenings that immediately succeeded Cuckoo's departure from South Audley Street; the romance of her sudden arrival at George's rooms; their scurrying about for a room for her that night; their marriage at the King's Road Registry Office the next day; these things had at the time been told to Rosamund by Rachel, and, in view of Rachel's positive asseverations that despite everything Nicky really loved George, there had seemed to Phil Brinkley's wife every chance of happiness for the young couple.

For Rosamund had even then begun to discover that her own happiness depended, incredible though it at first seemed to her, less on her husband's millions than on her husband's personality, and she could not regret Nicky's having been, so to speak, catapulted into the arms of the man she cared for.

"It's a good thing she did make that idiotic blunder, Ray," the elder sister had remarked at the time; "she'd have been miserable with Bertie Fab."

She had never forgotten Rachel's stare of surprise. "That's a funny thing for *you* to say, Rosie," Rachel had said, and she had returned hastily:

"I know—I know what you mean, dear, but—well, Bertie Fab is pretty awful."

It was at about this time that the subject of Phil Brinkley's awfulness had begun to be less easily alluded to by his mother- and sister-in-law.

"Rachel was dreadfully upset about—about Mr. Fab-

ricius, you know," Rosamund went on, as Cuckoo refilled her cup. "She actually cried about it."

"I remember. You see," Cuckoo elucidated, "Rachel *knew*. Knew, I mean, what all this—this 'all for love and the world well lost' business really means. Heavens, what fools we were, and what an almighty mess we have made of our lives! Have another bit of bun?"

"Is—is George well?" Rosamund asked, after a while.

"Well? No, he's never well," Cuckoo answered bitterly.

"Poor fellow! But tell me about the Fabs—I mean to say the Fabriciuses."

"Oh, I don't mind their being called the Fabs! The Vicar used to call them the Fabricii. You mean about the time after the battle? Well, I heard nothing of them or even about them for nearly a year. Bertie, you know, really showed up remarkably well, considering that he is Aunt Marcia's son—but Aunt Marcia soon talked him round. I met Almond, the butler, one day, just after he came back to town, and he told me. Low to talk to a servant, wasn't it?—but I wanted to know. It appears that, little by little, Bertie took to reviling me in Aunt Marcia's best style——"

"But surely they wouldn't discuss you before the servants?"

Cuckoo shrugged her shoulders. "Wouldn't they! Oh, I suppose they *thought* they didn't, they'd stop when Almond came in, and begin when he left the room again—*you* know. And servants have wonderful ears. At any rate, Almond, who always liked me, seems really indignant. Poor Bertie, even at his best, was never really a gentleman, you know, and Almond was rather a swell in his own line. I've often wondered," she broke off, smiling reflectively, "what he'd think of Mrs. Peacock, our char! But I was going to tell you of poor old Uncle Adolph.

You know he settled two hundred a year on me? It was *his*, so I've kept it. His anger was pretty fierce, but it was just, and I never resented anything *he* said; well, George has only one hundred and fifty pounds of his own. Did you know the Vicar was dead?"

"No. Poor old man, is he really?"

"Yes, he died eight months ago. Heavens, how I'm wandering! Well, Uncle Adolph knew we were horribly poor, of course, and it appears he saw me getting in a bus in the Strand one day, and knew I was going to have a baby. So just before the poor little wretch was born a box came with the loveliest layette you ever saw. You remember his giving me money to buy some baby-clothes for Ray? These things came from the same shop, and the poor old darling must have picked them out himself —it—wasn't it sweet of him, Rosamund?" She cleared her throat, and, crumbling a bit of bun with her thin fingers, went on slowly, "I—I was really awfully pleased."

"Of course you were, dear."

"I spread them all out on the bed, and—it seemed to make things not so hopeless after all—I don't mean because Uncle Adolph was rich; I believe that for once I was really quite decent about money, in my mind—but about the baby, and—*us*."

Rosamund laid her hand on her friend's.

"And then," Cuckoo went on, the softness leaving her eyes and her voice, "George came home and—made me send the things back."

"But—I thought George Loxley such a gentle creature——"

"You haven't had the privilege of knowing George Loxley the husband! Oh, yes, he was very much the husband on that occasion. '*My* wife; *my* child; *my* honor.' Oh, such wretched sentimental twaddle as he talked! However, I hadn't the courage to fight, so I

sent the things back. He wouldn't even let me write a note to explain!"

"But, Nicky, I don't see why he did it. There was no sense in it. The old man is your uncle, and *he* hadn't ever been horrid to you——"

"That made no difference. He's Aunt Marcia's husband and Bertie's father, and that was enough."

Rosamund thought for a moment. "Perhaps it is a kind of jealousy. He may still resent your having been willing to marry Mr. Fabricius, and, what's more, he may be jealous that he can't give you beautiful things. Jealousy shows itself in the very oddest ways, you know——"

Cuckoo nodded. "No doubt it was something of the kind. He was very fond of me in those days, of course——"

"But"—something in her own inner life was giving Rosamund Brinkley an odd, new shyness in speaking of great things, so she hesitated as she asked her question, "you don't mean that he—doesn't love you now?"

"Of course he doesn't, but—here he is—you can judge," Cuckoo answered, with that very ugliest of all facial distortions, a sneer, "for yourself."

George Loxley escorted his wife's caller to her car with the same cold indifference that had marked their whole interview. His cousin, who had always known him very slightly, was struck with the change in him, and on her way home she thought more of him than of Cuckoo.

His boyish sweetness of aspect was utterly gone; his face was lined, his voice full of a weary passivity, his very eyes looked different.

He told her that he was still painting, adding casually, "I paint very badly, you know, so of course I sell once in a while——"

There was about Cuckoo an activity of misery that in

a way was less dreadful to see than this five-and-twenty-year-old boy's springless, passive indifference.

"Poor, poor George," Rosamund thought, as she rang her door-bell. "I must get Phil to buy one of his things——"

"Mr. Brinkley is in the library, my lady," the butler told her, "and would like your ladyship to go to speak to him——"

As she went down the hall the young woman buried her face for a moment in her muff, and when she raised her head a beautiful tremulous smile illuminated her.

CHAPTER XXII

WHEN George Loxley went upstairs after seeing his cousin Rosamund's car glide away up the sordid street, he met his wife on the first landing coming down.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"For a walk," she returned.

"It's six, and it's simply pouring——"

"That doesn't matter. Don't expect me till I'm back."

They spoke with that assumption of politeness that is, of all demonstrations, the most disheartening between a man and wife who are quarreling; their eyes looked beyond each other.

"Very well. If I go out I'll leave the key under the mat."

Cuckoo walked to the Embankment and slowly along it. The streets were empty, for it was a miserable evening, and would soon be night. The trees in Battersea Park were already partly denuded of their leaves, and the water between Cuckoo and them was dark and swollen. On her left, windows were now lighted, and several times she caught the extension of an arm and the descent of a blind; these things gave her a little added grievance—a shut-out, homeless feeling. Once a hurrying cab splashed her with mud at a crossing, and she wiped her face on her coat sleeve as a tramp woman might have done. She was going nowhere in particular, but she walked quickly, keeping time with her reflections.

Rosamund Brinkley's unexpected visit had, so to speak, stirred up the torpid waters of her thoughts; for a long

she had felt something like hatred for her husband, and unconsciously, in a kind of self-defence, she had strengthened this hatred by mentally dwelling on little peculiarities of his that, but for the great fact of their poverty and what she considered his idiotic refusal of help from Sir Adolph, would have been regarded by her with indulgence, if not with actual tenderness.

She was very healthy herself—wiry and sound to the core—and George's constitutional delicacy, since she had been obliged to live with it at close quarters with but little of amusement or interest to draw her mind from it, had from the beginning irritated her intensely. He had a little throat-spray which he used as a preventive against colds, the very sight of which, after the first few months, drove her to a frenzy of malicious anger. This was one of the hundred little pinpricks from which collectively she bled. They seemed to her, with her exasperated nerves, even worse than the big fact that on the Vicar's death George had been obliged to pay out something like three hundred pounds to cover the effects of some speculations the old man had innocently been drawn into on the occasion of one of his visits to London on some book-hunting prowl; or the other fact that there were various booksellers' bills and such minor matters that had further depleted young Loxley's purse.

Cuckoo had been fond of the Vicar but when the fact of his indiscretion had been made clear to her, and she realized that she had to suffer for the old man's stupidity, her feeling had turned to one of impatient loathing. After their marriage they had lived some six months in a village on the South Coast, and at the end of this six months the fact that she had made a hopeless and irrevocable mistake had turned the girl so bitterly against her husband that at last, after some quarrel, he, too, had lost his temper and reminded her—and this she had never for-

given him—that, after all, their marrying had been more her doing than his.

George's gentle spirit had suffered limitlessly from shame and horror for this speech, but he had made it, and Cuckoo was of those women who never quite forget.

On her two hundred and George's one hundred pounds they had lived for a while in rooms on their return to town, and after the birth and death of the child, George, ill and feverish himself, and worried to death by the fact that Cuckoo, in her utter indifference, did not recover as she should have done, committed the great and unforgivable folly of not only speculating with his tiny capital, but actually of speculating under the advice of the very man who had so disastrously counselled the grandfather. At this Cuckoo had undoubtedly a right to be angry, but George had an equal right to be angry with her cruel expositions of her wrath, and he broke down under the awful trial of having for the next few months to live entirely on her money. Too ill to paint, too unhappy to read, his nerve utterly broken, he was indeed an almost unbearable housemate; and any woman who was his wife would have deserved pity. Moreover, he had suffered in the loss of the poor little baby, for, manlike, he had hoped that the child's coming might have proved a bridge between him and Cuckoo. His anger with her for her unfeigned indifference to the death of the child, who—and this seemed to George to make it worse—was a girl, was a just anger, but in his turn, he, too, had blundered in the expression of what he felt, and Cuckoo never forgave him for some of the ways in which he had shown her that he could never forgive her for her lack of motherly feeling.

These things had gone from bad to worse, and in the hopeless, tragic jumble in which the two young people found themselves at the end of their second year of marriage, Rosamund Brinkley's visit seemed to have some-

how lit one little star of hope; and just because the high gods have an imperishable sense of humor, it chanced that afternoon that a large and vainglorious touring car underwent, near the timber yard on the Embankment, a humiliating minor accident of some kind that caused it to be stopped at the curb while the chauffeur performed some small operation on its interior.

Cuckoo wore a shabby coat and skirt and a cheap yellow oilskin coat. Through the oilskin coat the lithe lines of her figure were visible as a fly is visible in amber, and between its high collar and her little dark hat her angry, brooding face, white as chalk, with close-drawn brows and swollen scarlet mouth, was, in the dismal, rain-swept street, as poignant and tragic as a bare stiletto. She had, perhaps, never in her life looked so arresting as, making her way over the muddy crossing, she drew near to the car. And in the car sat the person of all people who could observe and appreciate her face.

A big man in a rough frieze coat on which the raindrops lay as dew lies on cobwebs in the morning, sat in the back of the car. A man with a striking un-English face, clean-cut, noble in outline; the face of one who was, in some way, a leader or commander. Cuckoo glanced at him as she paused, and the blaze of interest—it seemed almost of recognition—in his splendid dark eyes, fairly stopped her rapid walk. So close did he seem to come to her in that intent look that yet was not a stare, that she all but bowed.

"What a splendid old man!" she thought, as she hurried on in the dusk.

As she passed Westminster Abbey a car passed her from behind, and, turning, she saw that it was the man she had noticed a few minutes before. He was leaning forward without his hat, and the rapid rush through the air had ruffled his hair, which was quite gray.

Cuckoo knew that he had turned and followed her—although he passed and didn't come back—on purpose for another look at her, and, although among her many faults there had never been the ignoble one of indiscriminate flirtation and though her personal dignity had always been very great, she was glad. It was something to her after all her months of hopeless dullness and dull hopelessness—much to her—that a man of such obvious importance and charm as this old stranger should have taken the trouble to follow her in her thirty-shilling coat and her three-year-old hat. It gave her a long-forgotten sense of power as well as a minor one of pleased vanity.

George, she knew, would go to his club, a humble club of minor painters and literary men held at a little restaurant near their house. He would dine there and sit and smoke until he believed her to be asleep, so there was no hurry for her to get home. Suddenly an idea struck her, and by means of a couple of buses she achieved a point near South Audley Street. She would go and have a look at 65B. Since the day she had left it she had never set eyes on the house.

As she went along Curzon Street she saw that it was the hour when the earlier diners, those who were bound for the theater, set out for the evening. Cars stood at several doors, and more than one door opened as she passed, giving her a glimpse of comfortable halls, as well-dressed men and women, under carefully held umbrellas, hurried to their cars. It was a long time since Cuckoo had seen women in evening dress, and the sight of their bare shoulders and jewels, and particularly of their delicate satin-shod feet, gave her an almost physical pang of jealousy. Fool, thrice fool that she had been!

Nobody noticed her. She was, to these people to whose caste she belonged, merely a scurrying, wet-footed little work-girl going home. No one turned to look at her even,

except one flaccid-faced butler, who, as he crossed his master's door, condescended to bestow on her an abominable leer.

No. 65, South Audley Street, she found, was either closed or empty, and partly because her aunt's car, a new one she noticed, was standing before the door, and partly because she suddenly found herself extremely tired, she sat down on the step in the shadow of the balustrade. Someone was giving a party nearly opposite and a constant stream of cars and carriages came up to the door. Amongst the people who got out of them was that Sir George Porter, whose telephone message she had made such good use of centuries before it seemed, with Bertie Fabricius.

Cuckoo wondered what had become of poor little Captain Browne, the only man of all she had met at her aunt's, except Bertie, who had cared for her, or even, she realized now, really liked her. She was very wet, her feet ached, her little old hat, pierced by many pins, let the water through on to her hair; but in an odd way she liked being wet and miserable; it increased the feeling that had come to her that Rosie's visit had marked, not so much a beginning of a period in her life, as an end. She did not know what was going to begin but she knew that something was, because it grew clearer to her with every moment that her recent life with George had come, so to speak, to an end.

So there she sat, until the door on her left opened and she heard Almond's voice saying good evening to the chauffeur, as he opened a huge umbrella, dedicated to Lady Fabricius' passages from house-door to car and from car to house-door. Then she heard a thud and the well-known roll of red carpet bounced down the steps to where a new footman stood with his hand on the door of the car. Cuckoo, huddled in her place, strained her

ears to hear, and at last came the sound of voices and the stiff tap of her aunt's little shoes on the polished floor. Majestic though unwieldy, the old lady, who was fatter than ever, stumped slowly down the steps, leaning on the devoted arm of Almond, while Walter held the umbrella over them as an acolyte in a religious procession in the South holds an umbrella over the priest. Behind her, looking very small in a new coat, holding an umbrella over his silk hat, went Sir Adolph. When the two were safely settled in their car, Cuckoo leaned forward and listened, while the butler told the chauffeur where to take them, and on hearing the direction she gave a soft laugh. They were dining with Lord and Lady Thorsway, so perhaps Bertie's wounded heart had healed and he was going to be a good boy and marry according to his Mamma's behests. But a moment later the girl strained back closer than ever in her corner, for Bertie Fabricius himself came up the street towards her on foot. She saw his face distinctly as the door on her right opened and the light fell on it. He looked much the same, but he was in a tearing hurry and took out his watch with a jerk and a muttered "damn" as he passed her.

When the door had slammed behind him the eavesdropper rose and walked on to Oxford Street. She went into an A.B.C.—crowded at the hour, ill-ventilated, and filled with probably worthy people whose early education in the matter of table manners had obviously been neglected—and dined on two excellent buns and a glass of milk. How, she didn't know, any more than years ago she had known that her life at Roseroofs would one day come to an end, but she knew that George and she were on the edge of parting. She munched her bun and drank her milk with deliberation that almost approached the point of comfort. She was not unhappy now; it seemed

to her as if she were rousing and stretching herself after a bad dream; as if her eyes were newly opened to the realities of life and to the fact that one of the realities of life was not that she should go on wasting her youth, and her capacity for living, in Barker Street with George.

When Loxley came in that night, after a long evening in a hot, stuffy room, thick with various kinds of offensively cheap tobacco, he found his wife sitting by the fire in the clothes in which she had gone out. She had not changed her shoes and they were steaming as she held them to the flame.

"George," she asked briskly. "Do you know where that Professor Withers lives?"

He looked at her indifferently.

"Of course I do—why?"

"Because I have been thinking," she said, "that it was a great mistake your not accepting his offer."

He frowned irritably. "Nonsense. How could I accept his offer? Go off to Cyprus and leave you here——"

He sat down, crossing his thin legs wearily, half-hiding a yawn with his hand.

"I," she went on, "am going to Roseroofs to stay with my aunts. It's going to be a fearful winter here; if you stay you'll be ill and unfit for work, and you know what he said about the climate out there. I've been thinking about it and I want you to write to him."

George looked at her glumly.

"Poor old Cuckoo," he said. "Can't stand any more of it, eh?"

She paid no attention to this remark but went on:

"He'll pay you well for these drawings, and we certainly can't go on like this any longer. Aunt Effie and Aunt Flora won't mind having me, I'm sure. What do you think?"

There was a long pause, during which his hollow eyes regained a little of their gentleness as he looked at her.

"Why do you want me to go?" he said. "Not just because of my health—because I may be quite well this winter, you know,"——

She shook her head. "There is no reason why you should be quite well this winter. You've never been well any winter in London yet."

He got up and walked restlessly about the room, taking up and putting down various little objects without knowing what they were. At last he came back to her and stood by her chair.

"Look here, Cuckoo," he said. "You're quite right, of course, to say that this kind of thing can't go on. It's perfectly miserable. But it's my fault as much as yours, if not more. My wretched nerves have not been right for ever so long, but—what do you say to having another try? Just sort of beginning over?"

He laid his hand on her wet hair, and by a tremendous effort she let it stay there. She paused for a moment, knowing that on her reply rested the whole of her immediate future. At last she wisely decided telling the truth so far as possible.

"I don't see," she said, "that there would be a bit of use in trying to begin over now. We are frightfully on each other's nerves; neither of us is well, and with winter coming on and so little money—honestly, George, I don't think that with the best will in the world we'd stand a chance of getting things right!"

He sighed. "Perhaps not. I've been an awful failure, Cuckoo, and I know it. I've said some things to you for which I ought to have been killed, and the funny part of it is that I never knew before that I had a temper. But there are two things that in spite of everything are unchangeable, my wish to paint really well and——"

"Yes, yes, I know, and you will paint well one day, probably very soon in a decent climate with no worries. George, *do* go."

He went to an untidy writing-table in the corner of the room, switched on the light over it, and, after turning over and searching through a pile of papers, found the letter and came back with it.

"Here's Withers' address. I suppose it could be arranged," he said, "but I don't like to leave you, Cuckoo. Even though things seem to have got into such a horrible mess. I do love you, you know."

She turned away from him, and at the words her face contracted angrily. After a little pause the young man went on.

"You'd be very dull with the Aunts all winter."

The bitter sarcasm that rose to her lips at this she suppressed with an effort.

"It's a long time since I have seen the Aunts," she said. "I shall be glad to be with them for a while."

At that minute George Loxley sneezed several times with great violence. She shrugged her shoulders with a laugh, which she vainly attempted to make good-tempered.

"There you are, you see. You'll sneeze all night and you'll wake up with fever, and the day after to-morrow is the first of November——"

A week later George Loxley set out for Cyprus to paint a series of twelve sketches of that historical island to illustrate Professor Withers' forthcoming book. The Professor, who in the kindness of his heart went to the train to see his young friend off, was much touched by the presence of her whom he called "Loxley's little wife." There was in her face a look of purpose that the kind old man mistook for one of fortitude, and when the last

moment came, he turned his back on the adieux of the poor little people whom he believed himself to be brutally tearing from each other's arms.

"There, there, my dear," he said kindly, patting Cuckoo's shoulder, "he'll soon be back with you—in three months; you must cheer up—only three months and he'll be back with you. Just bear that in mind, and you'll be all right."

Cuckoo looked at the infinitesimal amount of face that his beard allowed her to see and answered him with appropriateness. Then she climbed on top of a bus, for the day was fine, and made her way back to Chelsea.

CHAPTER XXIII

CUCKOO LOXLEY went to Wiskedale as she had arranged to do, and she stayed there a fortnight.

She had laid the fuse of her plans and had decided that until the spark had reached the explosive she could afford to wait and to rest. She was very nearly a nervous wreck and she knew it, but the dale air and the quiet life of Roseroofs would heal her.

Miss Effie and Miss Flora were delighted to have her with them again, and the evening of her arrival they sat in the drawing-room till after eleven—a most unusual thing—listening to her version of her affairs.

The immortal Bowdler himself could not with greater skill have glossed over the acerbities of the matter of her story with greater skill than she showed.

George was seedy, she said, and their large studio did not warm well, so she had feared the winter for him, and they had jumped at the chance of his going to Cyprus for the dear old Professor. "It's only for three months, you know," she added easily, "and it's sure to do him good."

"You don't look well yourself, Cuckoo," Miss Effie remarked in a voice that sounded severe, looking over the tops of her spectacles.

Cuckoo laughed. "I'm not. I'm as thin as a kipper, George says—one cold after another I've had ever since early in September! Chelsea is lovely, of course, but it's very low, you know, and I don't think it suits either of us particularly——"

The old sisters had not changed much since she had seen them—she and George had spent a fortnight with them that first summer—they were growing older in a very satisfactory, even manner. Their eyes, and ears, and hair, and skin, were marching steadily on towards the enemy in a rhythmic, dignified way, only Miss Flora's teeth still looking too young for the rest of her.

They had, Cuckoo noticed, put on their best to do her honor, and she knew that up to the last Christmas the blue and brown silk gowns had adorned the body of her enemy. Lady Fab, she reflected, must now, considering the different effects of age on them, make four of Miss Flora, who was as thin as her eldest sister was fat.

Neither old lady mentioned Lady Fabricius; they had been told the story of the quarrel by Marcia, but luckily for their peace of mind Marcia had always been given to exaggeration, particularly in anger, so they had received her charges against Cuckoo with a certain innocent mental reserve, especially as Cuckoo, with wisdom beyond her years, had abstained from explanations and justifications of any kind.

George, always, as they knew, a scrupulously truthful person, on the occasion of his visit to the dale with his bride, had told the story in his way, and his words had consoled Miss Effie and Miss Flora a great deal.

They never knew that his version was not to be believed entirely, as Cuckoo in her first rage had been too excited, too upset, to adhere strictly to the truth, and because after that first evening he had avoided all reference to the horrid scene.

"Let's forget all about your Aunt Marcia, darling," he had said to her. "She was a wicked old woman to treat you so abominably, but after all *I* can't be expected to bear her any lasting grudge!" So they had pretty completely dropped the subject, and George, until long

afterwards, did not know how much truth there had been in Lady Fab's outrageously expressed accusations.

And now Cuckoo settled down in her old room at Roseroofs, and in pursuance of her plan proceeded to give her health and her looks a chance to recover themselves before she left the dale.

Miss Flora brought her bread and milk after she was in bed; Miss Effie dosed her with some tea made out of a bitter root and supposed to contain highly tonic qualities, and old Esther Oughtenshaw waited on her hand and foot, and made for her all her old pet dishes.

It was by chance a very beautiful autumn, and though the only flowers left were a few asters and chrysanthemums, and a semi-occasional hardy rose-bud, with reddened edges and a bitten aspect, yet the moors were still haunted by the ghost of the purple of the heather, the grass in the dale was green, and the air only pleasantly sharp.

Cuckoo slept and ate well, and every day she found her nerves to be better, her so irritable temper less in a whirl, and her morning and evening walks grew longer and longer.

Once she and Aunt Flora walked to Widdybank and put some flowers on the old Vicar's grave under the south transept window. "We *do* so miss him," Miss Flora told her, as she rose from her knees; "he was a good, dear man."

Cuckoo nodded gravely. "Yes, he was," she agreed, quite forgetting the old man's speculative crimes and remembering him only as he had been in her childhood and young girlhood. "How do you like Mr. Kane?" Mr. Kane was the new vicar, whom the visitor had not yet seen.

Miss Flora gave a little skip of embarrassment, as if she were skipping away from a distressing subject. "Oh,

he's very nice," she answered. "Your Aunt Effie says his sermons are excellent——"

Cuckoo looked at her with grave eyes in which there was a secret glimmer. "What does my Aunt *Flora* say?" she asked.

Aunt Flora glanced at her with a look almost of fear. "Oh, what *I* think about new people," she said, "never amounts to much—your Aunt Effie would tell you how unobservant I am. . . ."

"I know," replied Cuckoo dryly. "I've often heard her say it, and I've sometimes wondered if she was altogether right,"——

At this moment the new vicar appeared, and was introduced to Mrs. Loxley by her aunt.

He was a large, blond man with easily pursable lips, and a long nose. He was a married man, and three of his children were with him.

When he had expressed his gratification at meeting the granddaughter-in-law of his greatly honored predecessor, his delight in the beauty of the dale, and his hope of seeing the Roseroofs ladies in church the next day, he went his way, and Cuckoo and Miss Flora went theirs.

"So you don't like him," Cuckoo observed quietly, as they reached the beck, "well, no more do I."

"Good gracious, Cuckoo, I never said I didn't like him——"

"Yes, you did, Aunt Flora, with everything but your tongue. I am a sharp-witted Cockney nowadays, you know." But neither of them mentioned the matter to Miss Effie, and as the days passed Cuckoo was confirmed in her new idea that Miss Flora's silence covered something which, in the old days, she had never suspected.

One afternoon Cuckoo walked up to Settle Farm, old Isaac Vosper's place. She found the old man in a big

chair by the fire in the kitchen, his wife reading aloud to him from a newspaper.

"Well, Agnes, well, Mr. Vosper, I thought I'd come up and have a look at you——"

Agnes, a sad-faced woman of six or seven and twenty, flushed oddly and let her husband answer. He was voluble, but not very easy to understand, for he had had his second stroke a few months before.

"He says he's very glad to see you, Miss Coocoo," his wife translated, but the old man was not satisfied and went on mumbling something over and over again.

"You feel what?" Cuckoo asked, kindly, but hating the sound he made and the spluttering.

He repeated the remark as best he could, scowling at his wife, who was trying to quiet him.

"Oh, yes, I understand, Mr. Vosper—I've got it, Agnes—how stupid we were not to understand him! He says he feels he owes me a good turn. Because of *you*, of course. What a nice compliment to us both!"

The old farmer nodded and gurgled in his satisfaction, and while Cuckoo talked to him his wife went to the window and stood there looking out.

When Cuckoo left, the woman walked with her across the paddock to the gate. "He's very ill, I fear," Cuckoo said, as they went along.

"Yes, Miss Coocoo. He's been ill for fower year now——"

"Oh, *poor* Agnes!"

Agnes nodded her smooth brown head. "Oo-aye, poor Agnes indeed, Miss Coocoo——"

They had reached the big whitewashed gate and stood by it looking down the road.

"He will not live long, poor old man," Cuckoo said softly. "It's very sad, of course, but he has had a long life, and then—you will be all right——"

Isaac Vosper's wife raised her brown, broad hand and brought it down passionately on the top bar of the gate. "All right! An' my Chris married a year ago last Christmas! Ah, ye meant well, no doot, Miss Coocoo, that time," she went on, broadly Doric as she proceeded, "but God knows it's maany a time Ah've wished you had let things bee——"

Cuckoo went her way deep in thought. Who was right? Rachel had married for love and had been unhappy; Rosie had married for money and was blissful with her awful husband; and here was Agnes, married for money and like a woman in an old tragedy, with her worn, wistful face.

It was to be a long time before Cuckoo found out the true answer to her question, but when she did, very suddenly and conclusively, she remembered as if a picture of it had been put before her, the late autumn road leading down to the dale from Settle Farm and the very turning at which she had asked herself, aloud, "Which is right?"

At the end of ten days Cuckoo, coming down to breakfast a little late, found on her plate two letters with foreign stamps.

"This is from George," she said, cordially, as she opened it. George wrote from Athens, where he was staying for a few days with a Greek friend of Professor Withers. "He's very well, and adores Athens," she announced, after a moment. "He sends his love to you both—he's sending me some photographs of Athens. Wasn't it nice of Professor Withers," she added, with a little burst of, to her, unusual enthusiasm, "to have him stop over in Athens, instead of going straight to Cyprus?"

Miss Flora's large eyes, that seemed to have grown more globular and even more limpid with the years, rested for

a second on her niece's face, as Miss Effie answered that it undoubtedly was kind of the Professor.

"What is the book that George is illustrating?" Miss Flora asked, after a pause, while Cuckoo finished her letter.

"On the ancient civilization of Cyprus. He has all the dull, technical pictures of buildings, and so on, but he wants reproductions in color of the scenery, so of course George will be blissful——"

The old ladies went on with their breakfasts, and Cuckoo looked at them, swept over by an intense, sudden wave of entirely uncalled-for pity. How many breakfasts had they eaten in that shabby, pleasant room? After a moment's calculation that it must be, she decided, for say five years spent away from home, something like twenty-three thousand. Three-and-twenty thousand eggs, usually boiled; six-and-forty thousand cups of tea apiece! It was an appalling thought to the girl, for what her father had called her "roving drop" had for the time being taken command of her, and the horror of what he had named one-placeness was strong on her. As to her, she was going to Paris!

Her plan had grown successfully, and the letter she had just read and laid down beside her cup was its flowering. Its fruit would be Paris.

The year before the return to England of Bertie Fabricius, Cuckoo had gone to Cowes with Lady Pelter and there she had met, amongst Lady Pelter's gay friends, one Countess Lensky, an American married, or formerly married, to a Pole. This Countess Lensky was enormously rich, enormously vital, and, some people said, as enormously common. A very large woman, corseted in a way that struck admiration to the souls of some of her beholders and terror to the souls of others, she was gay, noisy, good-tempered, indefatigable in the pursuit of

pleasure; and it must be added that she invariably came up with this elusive quarry. She made a solid success at the regatta, despite the obvious things that might have been, and were, said against her.

Her yacht, the *Tiger Lily*, flowed, so to speak, with milk and honey; she was generosity itself as well as hospitable, and at the end of the great week Lady Pelter and Cuckoo went for a short cruise with her.

"I like you the best of the lot, my dear," she had once said to Cuckoo; "you aren't so mean as most of the women, and you've got a temper. I haven't any use for those swell English women who couldn't get real mad if they tried——"

For some time after they separated, Cuckoo and this lady had kept up a desultory correspondence, but they had never met again, for the Countess had already tried London, and, as she frankly declared, couldn't stand it.

"Parrus for me," she would say, "and any of you who want to see me must come and see me in my little wooden hut there——"

Her little wooden hut was a huge flat in the Champs-Elysées, and to this sylvan spot Cuckoo had sent the letter, the answer to which arrived the morning of George's first communication from Greece. The Countess wrote, in a very large, very spidery hand, each word of which had a dashing little tail:

My Dear,

I *was* glad to hear from you after all this time. I did get your letter about your engagement, but I lost it somehow, and then I went to America where my brother was married—Edwin, you know, the one I used to want you to meet. He married such a sweet girl. . . . Of course I shall just love to have you visit me while your husband is away. It will do you good to be a bachelor for awhile. I always say it does a woman just as much good to be separated from her husband, as it does a man to be

away from his wife for awhile. I just love men, of course, but husbands get sort of troublesome, don't they? . . . Well, come just as soon as you can, and I promise you a warm welcome and a nice warm bedroom. I've got a new cook, and, I tell you as shouldn't, he's a real daisy. . . . My love to you, honey. Send me a wire when you are coming.

Yours ever,

MARGUERITE LENSKY.

The Aunts were much interested in Cuckoo's prospective visit to Paris. Aunt Flora insisted on lending her two of the quaint old rings that on great occasions adorned her own old fingers, and Aunt Effie, as the family linguist, regretted that Cuckoo's French was not better.

When she had left them standing at the gate in the pale November sunlight, the girl felt a little pang, not quite of love, not quite of pity, for them. They had always been kind to her, and they were old and she was young. She possessed the great quality of living in the beginnings of things; during her last weeks with George she had for the first time felt herself at an end, but her nature was to dwell in a land of beginnings. Hers was the tough vitality of mind that trouble cannot break, and even boredom can but temporarily bend.

The mystery and glamor of "just round the corner" would never leave her, and therefore she would never really grow old. Vaguely she knew this, and from it sprang her queer mood of sympathy for the two stay-at-home old ladies.

Her own affairs were far too engrossing, however, for her to waste much time thinking about her aunts, and her journey to London seemed but an hour, so busy was she with the glowing future.

On arriving at King's Cross she took a cab to a small hotel in Bloomsbury, and the next morning a young man in a jeweler's shop in Oxford Street came to meet her

as with an assured mien she entered his multi-millionaire master's famous premises.

"What can I show you, madam?" the young man asked.

Cuckoo smiled. "Nothing, thanks," she answered tranquilly. "It is I who have something to show you——"

CHAPTER XXIV

CUCKOO'S first impression of Paris, during her drive from the Gare du Nord to the Place de l'Opéra and thence up the Champs-Elysées, was one not of the streets but of the indescribable, mechanical gaiety of its lights. Against the overhead blackness of the November night flashed and glowed and burned in all directions, words and symbols in all colors and of all degrees of stability. Red globes forming letters changed to blue squares, and then to triangles of emerald. A huge golden bottle hung apparently from the sky for several seconds, and then melted into the surrounding darkness, replaced by the word, in crimson, "Vinofer."

Cuckoo was tired, but though this chaos of brilliancy wearied her eyes, its effect on her mind was one of excitement and stimulation. She sat well forward in her rickety little fiacre gazing up, drinking in the subtle excitement of the Parisian night. She had forgotten George; she had forgotten Roseroofs; she had, in a way, forgotten herself. She was not Cuckoo Loxley, the embittered wife of a poor man, going away for a stolen holiday; she was just any girl arriving in Paris for a delightful visit and full of the intensity of anticipation possible only to a creature capable of the greatest heights and the greatest depths of temperamental fluctuations. She was thrilled to the marrow by the Rue de la Paix, and did it the honor of forgetting, in her contemplation of its close-shuttered shops, the intoxicating heaven of whimsical lights that had so enthralled her. At the sight

of Napoleon standing on his pillar in the Place Vendôme, she gave a little laugh. She, Cuckoo Blundell, was actually there in the Place Vendôme, and that big white building with its blazing lights and its never quiet swing-door must, she knew, be the new hotel at which Rosie Brinkley had stayed on her last visit to Paris. At last her fiacre drew up at a great door in the Champs-Elysées and a uniformed personage came out and possessed himself of her luggage.

"I had better settle with the driver myself," the functionary said. "They are all thieves and pirates." He was, Cuckoo saw, an Irishman, and this trifling fact added new pleasure to the other pleasures which were crowding round her for recognition.

The stairs that mounted round the little lift were, she saw, of white marble, and a very thick red carpet was laid on them. The lift, though highly gilded and ornate in design, seemed like a toy in the big, imposing hall.

The Countess Lensky lived on the second floor of the house, and the huge mahogany door was opened at Cuckoo's ring by the grandest butler she had ever seen in her life. While she was struggling to answer a question he put to her in French, a tall girl with a waist of enviable slimness and a very coquettish muslin apron, came up the long passage that led from the square hall, parallel with the street, and told Cuckoo that Madame la Comtesse wished her to come to her dressing-room.

The Countess was delighted to see Cuckoo and kissed her several times in French fashion, pecking unsuccessfully at her ears. Then she made the girl sit down in an extremely comfortable easy chair and turned to the maid saying something in French.

"Did you bring your luggage with you?" she broke off to ask, and Cuckoo said "Yes."

"Good. Give the keys to Josephine and she'll unpack

for you. We dine at half-past eight at the 'Ritz' with some Argentines, and shall be going on somewhere, so make yourself smart. You do look well, my dear. Marriage has improved you, as it does every woman, just at first."

The Countess's hair had taken on a new color since Cuckoo had seen her and was worn in an entirely new way, but the kind, common face, though a little more flaccid and a little redder than Cuckoo remembered it, was not much changed. She looked as gay, as indifferent to the deeper things of life, as ever.

"I'm going to wear pink," she said, "so for goodness' sake don't you; pinks do swear so at each other."

"I shall wear black," Cuckoo announced indifferently. "I usually do."

The Countess, holding her chin up and speaking indistinctly as she rubbed some thick white liquid over her neck with a piece of cotton wool, went on talking.

"Awfully sorry I couldn't send a car to meet you, but my chauffeur's wife had a baby this afternoon and I had to let him go home and see her, and the second man is new and I daren't trust him with my new car. The new car is a beauty, by the way, Nicky. It has such a nice lining and all the fittings are blue enamel. I'm sure you'll like it. Now you'd better run along, dear. Josephine will have drawn your bath. You didn't bring a maid, did you?"

Cuckoo laughed. "Good gracious, no. I'm far too hard up for a maid."

She didn't look in the least hard up as she stood there in her *very* well made, dark blue coat and skirt and a very severe, very expensive little hat. Her boots, too, were the best London could provide, and her handbag was a masterpiece from Bond Street.

"Hurry up, then," the Countess called out, as a maid

answered her ring and Cuckoo prepared to follow her.

"I'll come along to your room as soon as I'm ready, and if you want Josephine, ring for her. You're to make yourself perfectly at home, you know. I'm an awfully bad hostess, because I always forget to ask people what they want, but it's so much easier if they'll just help themselves."

Cuckoo walked what seemed about a quarter of a mile down the crimson-carpeted corridor, and presently found herself alone in her room. It was a very ornate, extremely comfortable room opening off a small salon, and flanked on the other side by a bathroom composed entirely of glossy pink tiles. There was a great deal of white enamel and pink brocade and gilding about the little suite, yet Cuckoo, whose eye was trained not only by the exquisite fineness of Sir Adolph's taste, but also by the simplicity and fine atmosphere of Roseroofs, decided, as she looked round her in making ready for her bath, that everything was perfection. Oh, the difference between this and that awful place in Barker Street!

Despite her declaration that she was a bad hostess, the Countess Lensky's hospitality had indeed foreseen almost every need any guest could have. Cuckoo had never seen so many towels in her life, nor towels of so many different textures; and on the glass shelves, and table, and the huge marble washing-stand in her dressing-room, she found toilet accessories of an ingenuity and luxury that put anything she had hitherto seen to shame. There were big glass jars of different colored bath salts; there was a huge bottle of Russian eau-de-cologne and another of lavender water; there was a powder-box as big as a wash-basin, full of powder that smelt gloriously of orris; there was a porcelain box full of fragrant cold cream, and another with *gelée de miel*, and there was another, a barrel-shaped box full of a grayish, glutinous mass that

Cuckoo remembered as being the Countess's own favorite oatmeal and glycerine for the hands.

Cuckoo took her bath singing under her breath, and before she was quite dressed the Countess came in. Cuckoo had half expected some exclamation of admiration of her dressing-table silver; for this, severely plain, was the best of its kind and fresh from Regent Street. But no remarks were made, and the girl realized with a little gibe at herself that grand as these objects seemed to her, they naturally looked very simple—almost humble—to her hostess.

"That's right," the Countess exclaimed, as the skilful Josephine fastened her guest's frock. "Who made it?"

Cuckoo named one of the biggest houses in London; and she spoke the truth.

The Countess, resplendent in shell-pink brocade, and wearing three large ropes of pearls, as well as very long diamond ear-rings and a diamond fillet in her hair, looked very well in her way, although her lips were far too red and her cheeks too heavily powdered.

"Come along, we mustn't be late. Juan Martinez is giving the dinner, and a cousin of his, Vicente Ojeda, who is the richest man in the Argentine! They are sure to have Mimi Galgenstein, Juan is rather taken with her, and I suppose they'll have Olivier Ledru. He's a delightful creature, dances like an angel; one of the nicest men in Paris."

The two ladies hurried downstairs, there scarcely being room in the lift for Cuckoo, and then glided away in the big car that put Aunt Marcia's, the one Cuckoo had loved because it was as big as some people's drawing-rooms, into the limbo of old-fashioned things. Cuckoo, according to the plans that she had made for herself during her stay in Paris, maintained a pleasant but *nil admirare* attitude, and no one would have thought as

she walked up the long corridor at the Ritz behind her effulgent friend, that she had never set foot in the place before. The two Spaniards and the Baroness Galgenstein were waiting for them near the dining-room door at a table on which stood a tray containing six glasses filled with an amber liquid in which floated a preserved cherry. Cuckoo laughed.

"You know," she said, "I haven't tasted a cocktail since I left the dear old *Tiger Lily!*"

The restaurant was crowded with people of all nationalities, and the hum of voices in the warm-scented air, and the blaze of lights, and the beautifully dressed women, filled Cuckoo with an excitement and exaltation that she could hardly hide. Oh, it was good to be there—not in Barker Street!

The Baroness Galgenstein, a tall, handsome, dark woman of fairly remote Jewish extraction, was given the place of honor at the little table in the middle of the room.

At first the words spoken round her confused and dulled Cuckoo's ear. Since her childhood she had not heard the French of French people, and besides this she had to contend orally with Spanish French, and French Spanish, German French and German Spanish, Spanish English, and English Spanish, with American French and American Spanish, and American German. Behind her two Italians were talking volubly, and an enormously tall, bearded man, who, she learned, was a Russian Grand Duke, was speaking Russian to the Oriental-looking woman dining with him. The room reeked of scents, and there were enough pearls within its four walls to have paid for an army campaign a few centuries before.

Olivier Ledru, who really was, in his way, one of the best known men about Paris, was a small, pale man, with a waist and just a suspicion of an "Imperial." Cuckoo, who sat between him and Ojeda, was rather silent through

sheer force of enjoyment; the scents, and luxury, and leisure, and irresistible happiness, seemed to be soaking in through the very pores of her skin. She was in a bath of well-being. Ojeda, who was considerably younger than Martinez, and a very handsome boy on a diminutive scale, paid little attention to his younger neighbor, his mission in life, for the time, being very obviously that of offering incense at the Countess's shrine. Cuckoo noticed, as she looked round the room, that in all the parties this curious sub-division was apparent. Every woman, or almost every woman, seemed to have her own special cavalier, and the worshipping attitude of these gentlemen was more apparent than the worshipping attitude, no matter how great the inner adoration might be, could ever have been in any but a really cosmopolitan gathering. There was an air of unreality about the whole thing; nobody was at home, everybody seemed to be, as Cuckoo mentally put it, out for a lark. If a huge idol plainly marked "Amusement" had stood at one end of the room, the object of the worship of these people could not have been more clearly divined.

Theirs was a merry party, for the handsome Baroness Galgenstein was a clever woman and talked well, while Ledru was deservedly famous for the amusing quality of his flippant conversation. The Countess, leaning across Ojeda, who sat on her left, gave Cuckoo from time to time, in a perfectly audible voice, bits of information about the people at the surrounding tables.

"That thin girl with the Grand Duke," she said, "is Tamar, the Russian dancer, and the bald old man with the yellow carnation in his coat is G. M. Taylor."

"Who's G. M. Taylor?" Cuckoo asked.

"Good gracious, my dear! President of the Soft Soap Trust—richest man in the world."

Cuckoo's indifference gave way to a look of eager inter-

est, and she gazed at the plain old gentleman with the yellow carnation so fixedly that presently he saw her and smiled; whereupon she turned away angrily. As the dinner went on most of the parties became noisier, and the Countess expressed her disapproval of her young guest's comparative silence.

"Cheer up, Nicky," she called. "You're boring those two dear men to death. You didn't use to be so silent."

Cuckoo laughed. "You forget that I lead a very quiet life as a rule," she said, "and this quite confuses me."

Suddenly in the midst of her odd dreamlike mood she looked up and saw in a glass in front of her a man's face. She set down her champagne glass with a little jar. Who could it be? The man's eyes held hers, and it was quite plain he was asking the same question. They had met before, but where or when she could not remember.

Ojeda had drawn nearer the Countess, the Baroness was busily engaged with Martinez. Cuckoo looked at Ledru.

"Can you tell me," she said, "who that man is? He must be sitting almost behind you, at least over your right shoulder. He's alone at a table. I can just see his face in the glass."

"Who—the Japanese?"

"No, no. An old man, he looks—I shouldn't think he was English."

Ledru put up his eyeglass and turned it round.

"Oh, that!" he said, "that's a man we call the Magnificent. I believe he's partly Italian, and someone nicknamed him Il Magnifico. He seems to know you, by the way——"

Cuckoo laughed. "No, but I've seen him somewhere."

At that moment she saw in the glass that the man in question had risen and was coming towards them. He threaded his way among the little tables, walking, despite

his very broad shoulders and his six feet of height, with singular delicacy, as if his feet were small and of fine muscle. He went straight to the Countess, who was flirting with Ojeda, and spoke her name.

With a little shriek of joy she recognized him and held out her jewel-covered hand.

"You, Magnifico! How perfectly delightful. Mire Usted Martinez," she cried, "look, Martinez, here's Il Magnifico."

Martinez turned and shook hands with the newcomer.

"I thought you were in Cairo," he said.

"I was," the stranger answered in a deep, pleasant voice, his white teeth shining. "I've been back about a week. *Baronin*," he added, bowing over the Baroness's hand, which, Cuckoo noticed, he kissed, "*Wie geht es Ihnen?*"

When Martinez had persuaded him to join their party and he had shaken hands with Ledru, the Countess, leaning across the table, introduced him to Cuckoo, and he sat down between her and Ojeda, who drew up close to the Countess.

He was a very handsome man, with a well-cut, dark face, and really magnificent eyes, eyes of the very rare golden brown that is so indescribably beguiling. He was heavily built and looked to be of great strength, although he was close on sixty. His hair, almost snow-white, was of the crisp kind that would have curled had he not worn it close cropped. About his finely modeled mouth there was an ironical expression that was utterly and delightfully belied by the sweetness of his smile. Cuckoo had remembered him the moment he approached the table. He was the man she had seen in the motor-car on the Embankment the day of Rosamund Brinkley's visit.

"It was a wet night, wasn't it?" he asked.

"It was," she returned.

It seemed to Cuckoo his appearance, and his sitting there by her, was the most natural thing in the world, as if for a very long time she had known he was coming—expected it. Suddenly all her absent-mindedness, her silence, what had seemed her dullness, dropped from her like some disguising garment for which she had no more need. Ledru stared at her; it was quite plain to him that the woman he had thought simply dull and boring must have been, herself, bored by him and Ojeda. She was better than pretty now, as she chattered to the Magnificent, and her queer eyes, like the eyes of a little boar, he thought, were blazing with interest and excitement.

He and Martinez, chancing to catch each other's eye, exchanged a significant glance on the subject of Cuckoo and the white-haired man. It was as if they had said, "Here's another of them." The Countess, speaking in what she considered an undertone, remarked to the Baroness and Martinez "that there was life in the old dog yet."

"Of course he's perfectly incorrigible, the old sinner, isn't he?" the Baroness laughed. She was one of the myriad women who had loved Peregrine Janeways, and yet she had, after his inevitable flitting, gone on being friends with him in the way that women do; as they did long ago with the inimitable and ever-to-be-lamented Casanova.

"*Il est délicieux*," she murmured, "*toujours beau et toujours irrésistible, ce cher Magnifique!*"

At about half-past ten the party adjourned to Montmartre, and sat until about two in the cabaret that was for the moment the most fashionably improper of all.

Cuckoo was not particularly interested in the scores of beautifully dressed *cocottes*, with their odd, tragic resemblance to each other, and the bad air and metallic gaiety of the place did not much amuse her, but Sir Peregrine

Janeways did. He had a remarkable and romantic blend of the desperado and the courtier in his manners. He was a man of immense personal dignity and an impeccable knowledge of the world. He made no pretense at youth, and in his magnificent health and boundless love of life and humanity he seemed to turn the worn-out pleasure-seekers round him into ancient and decrepit beings.

His hands, too, brown, slim and muscular, might have been the hands of a young man in his twenties. Cuckoo knew that he had been called "the last of the dandies," and that jokes were made about his having been a crony of the Regent's, but she found in him a quality she had hitherto never met and to which she could give no name. During her first two years in London he had been, she knew, in India and China, which explained her never having seen him. Once she was about to tell him that she was Robert Blundell's daughter and that he still owed her a pony, promised her at the age of four, but some unanalysed feeling came to her like a warning that it would be better that he should not know who she was, so she said nothing. He was a man of great courtesy and great urbanity, and besides devoting himself almost exclusively to her for the whole evening, he had a few words quiet talk with Mimi Galgenstein and what the Countess called a long "pow-wow" with her, during which she chaffed him unmercifully and a little vulgarly about some of his adventures. But Cuckoo, as he shook hands with the Countess and her at the door of the Countess's *appartement*, felt that in essentials the last six hours had been exclusively hers, and in this she was right.

"You've done the trick, dear," the Countess said sleepily, between the yawns, as they sat in her morning-room drinking camomile tea before going to bed. "He's crazy about you."

Cuckoo laughed. "I suppose you mean Sir Peregrine, as I so obviously bored the other two to sobs."

"I do mean him. Dear old Magnifico! Oh, Nicky, I *was* so gone on him once. I wish it hadn't all happened when you were crawling on the nursery floor. He never cared a button about me really, you know, but oh, what a darling he was! He was so good-looking! That was in the Duchess of Galway's day, but he was awfully kind to me. I have still got a purple ribbon that was round a bunch of violets he once sent me."

"Well, I wish he'd send me some violets," said Cuckoo, rising. "Perhaps he will, if I'm good."

Countess Lensky kissed her.

"Good-night, Nicky dear."

"Good-night, Countess."

The elder woman laughed merrily.

"Good gracious! You mustn't go on calling me 'Countess.' In those days I was Blanche Pelter's friend and you were a child, but now I'm *your* friend, so you must call me Marguerite."

Cuckoo responded prettily.

"With pleasure," she said. "Thanks so much for a delightful evening, and good-night—Marguerite."

CHAPTER XXV

FOR a week Cuckoo lived in an unbroken whirl of gaiety, perfectly innocent in itself but strangely deadening in its cumulative effect; she ate too much, smoked too much, even in a way drank too much. She never got to bed before three or four in the morning and learnt without effort to sleep until eleven or twelve.

Day after day she lunched and dined in a crowd of people who with curious rapidity had advanced to the rank of what they called friends.

The Baroness Galgenstein, now called Mimi, was one of these; Annina Lerminoff, a small, bloodless Russian, was another; Queenie Vaux, who since the Warrenden divorce case found Paris better for her health than London, another.

Of these, and others like them, was the Comtesse Lensky's social world composed, but one thing could be said of her friends that could not be said of other similar coteries: the women, most of them a little vulgar or a little flawed morally, were at least all of them women with brains.

The Baroness Galgenstein played the piano as well as many professional musicians, and in the side of her life of which the Countess saw nothing—for the reason that it would only have bored her—there was work, and thought, and serious criticism, and earnest, conscientious artist friends.

The little Russian was a distinguished student of the literature of her own country and came to la Lensky only for mental rest and diversion, whereas even Lady

Vaux, gray sheep though she was, was a brilliantly entertaining woman, the honored friend of many distinguished scientific and artistic people.

The men whom Cuckoo met were less interesting, being chiefly little dark creatures from southern countries, remarkable more for their riches and the diversity and extravagance of their amours than for anything else.

It was plain to *la petite* Loxley from the first that in the commodious and elegant aviary into which her errant wings had borne her, Sir Peregrine Janeways was only an occasional sojourner. His was a stronger, more savage pinion than those of the other birds there, his note a wilder one.

"He's staying on in Paris entirely on your account, you know," Lady Vaux said to her on one occasion.

"I'm sure you are mistaken," Cuckoo answered. "He has hundreds of friends here"——

The elder woman smiled not altogether merrily. "My dear child," she said, "I've known Pelly Janeways for fifteen years and I'm pretty well used to his little ways! Where, by the way," she added, suddenly, "is your husband?"

"In Cyprus. Why, do you think I am in danger of being snatched from him?"

Lady Vaux laughed. "Emphatically not. The dear Magnificent never snatched, even in his most dangerous days. He—he whistles, and—*we* go to him," she added, whimsically.

"He sounds quite odious," Cuckoo criticized, her nose in the air. "Like the irresistible hero in a servants' halfpenny novelette!"

"Yes, he does, rather," conceded the other woman, slowly; "it would take a genius to tell his story *without* vulgarizing him into that kind of thing. Anthony Hamilton might have done it——"

"If he had, there'd have been more of Anthony Hamilton in the book than of Peregrine Janeways," commented Cuckoo. "He ought to write it himself, as Casanova did his. Monsieur Ledru says he is like Casanova, anyhow——"

Meantime Janeways' attentions to young Mrs. Loxley were of a highly un-Casanovesque type.

A lover of beautiful and noble things himself, he assumed in her a better taste than she really possessed, and he took her to see, a few at a time, some of the finest pictures in the world, one or two masterpieces of sculpture, and, what she liked better, some of the unspoilt corners of old Paris.

He took her in his car to all the usual shrines of the imagination in which the environs of the beautiful town so generously abound, and to which she found, a little to her surprise, he reverently bowed his gay old head.

Versailles, the vulgarization of which was patent even to the inexperienced and unstoried Cuckoo, still held for him the magic he had found in it nearly half a century before, and as they stood looking at the little Trianon his big eyes swam in tears.

"Poor little queen," he said, quite unashamed of his emotion, "poor little thing!" And for a moment Cuckoo, too, could nearly see through the magic casement that so plainly stood wide open to her companion.

Malmaison, on the contrary, did not greatly move him. He expressed a polite sympathy for Josephine, but he despised Napoleon as an underbred fellow with no romance in him.

On one unforgettable golden afternoon Janeways took Cuckoo to a little old convent in a steep street in old Paris. It was a warm day; Cuckoo wore a new frock that had been made for her as no other frock had ever been,

by a great artist, and she looked her highest best. Janeways, dressed as he usually was, in blue serge, had a flower in his coat; there was also, obviously, a flower in his heart, and that flower was blossoming furiously as they walked up the steep, cobbled street at the foot of which they had been obliged to leave the car.

"Sister Marie Séraphine," he explained, as they paused outside a little old church in the square, to get their breath, and looked back over their rugged way, "was the prettiest girl you ever saw in your life, forty years ago. Ah, how long ago it is, forty years! She lived with her grandmother, and I, a youth, was often at the house. She was fiancée with a young man who adored her and they were to be married in a month, when suddenly she broke the engagement and came here—to the convent. Poor Xavier nearly broke his heart—he is still alive, and still unmarried—and now you will see in the heroine of this real romance, a little old dried-up nun——"

He broke off, looking dreamily down the street, and Cuckoo studied his face in its unconsciousness. That he could be and was, all of a sudden, so innocent of the presence of anyone and anything but his own dream, had always been one of his most attractive qualities, but this she could not know, and it struck her as odd and in a way childlike.

After a while they resumed their climb, and having waited some minutes at the gate, were admitted into the convent garden.

At the far end of the sunny, warm enclosure, where a few roses still clung to the bushes and where a great vine on the south wall was still green, lay the old yellow building with its many windows and its big closed door.

The sister who let them in opened a small door that was cut in the large one, and presently they found themselves in a little austere parlor. Janeways was very grave as

he sat by the window, facing the door whence his old friend must come.

Cuckoo looked round her; the atmosphere of the place made her vaguely uncomfortable; it smelt of soap and damp, and beeswax and shut-in-ness and incense, and all these things together made a combination which she mentally called a smell of piety. This smell she disliked, and she hated the simian face of the late Pope as it grinned at her in an exasperating rictus from its frame on the wall.

In the garden behind the house she saw various feminine figures flitting noiselessly about, some of them busy, others walking for their health's sake, but, she saw with a nervous movement of impatience, praying as they walked.

She wished she had not come; she wished she could go; she wished . . .

Then the door opened and Sister Marie Séraphine came in.

The Order was not one of the strictest, so she was not behind a grating but sat in a chair opposite her old friend, and talked to him without any particular air of reserve.

She smiled very kindly at Cuckoo, when Janeways introduced them, and the girl saw that her eyes were full of love and sweetness.

Janeways and she talked together, speaking so rapidly that Cuckoo could hardly follow them, but presently the nun turned to her and said very slowly, "You are English, Mademoiselle?"

"I am English," Cuckoo answered in her indifferent French, "but I am not Mademoiselle."

"Ah! you must forgive my mistake. It interests me to meet an English lady," the nun went on. "I have never before met one."

In answer to Cuckoo's surprise she added, with a smile

of peculiar beauty, "Indeed, Sair Péregrine is the only English person I have ever known."

When Cuckoo and Janeways again stood outside the high garden wall, he asked her if she had enjoyed her visit.

"I don't like the—the feel of a convent," she returned. "It seemed to be going to take my breath away. But I liked *her*. She is beautiful."

"Yes. She was always nearly an angel. I once very nearly fell in love with her, we are just of an age, and—did I ever tell you," he broke off, "the story of an old jewel of mine, called the Bag of Saffron?"

She shook her head. "No."

He smiled down at her. "I'll tell it to you. Let's sit on that bench outside the church, and I'll tell you. *Conte*"—he added with sudden sadness, "*d'un grandpère.*" They sat down on the bench, and taking off his hat and leaning his head against the dingy wall of the church, he told his story.

"Once upon a time," he began, "there lived in Genoa, by the sea, an old man who had only one son——"

Below them stretched the rough street, which, running between high walls, was almost like a village street, and beyond the houses at its foot they could see miles of roofs and a vast pale sky out of which dripped unevenly the golden light that so delicately painted the irregular gabled roofs and the glittering curve that was the river.

"—So the son, whose name has been forgotten," the story went on, "took his bundle and three pieces of gold, like the youths in all the fairy-tales, and crossed the sea, leaving the sun behind him, and came to a chilly, gray island where reigned an old king who wore a red rose in his crown.

"The young man, who as you know was a goldsmith, went to a great maker of jewels in the king's town and

showed him his work, and the old man said, 'By my soul, young stranger, your work is finer than mine. Who are you, and whence come you?' *Are you listening, Mrs. Loxley?*"

Cuckoo started. "I am."

"Good. So the young man said in Italian, '*Son pelligrino Genovese*,' which means, 'I am a Genoese pilgrim.' "

"Now the old goldsmith could not speak Italian, so when he tried to say '*pelligrino Genovese*,' he said '*pelligrin Janeways*'——"

"Oh!" Cuckoo turned, her face flashing with interest, "I see. That's——"

"Yes, that's the origin of my name. From Pelligrin it naturally evolved into Peregrine, and ever since the eldest son of my people has been called Peregrine."

"But who was the old king with the red rose in his crown?"

"The good King Henry VII. But I really want to tell you the story of the Bag of Saffron. You are not tired of it, are you? There is an old Ligurian legend about saffron, it was said to harm those in whom lay the germ of illness, mental or physical, but to a sound person it was believed to give strength, and a continuance and perfection of his or her goodness. Therefore it follows that it should be worn only by a man who is brave or a woman who is good. Do you see?"

"Yes. Then you think valor in a man and—goodness in a woman are—equally necessary things?"

Janeways looked gravely out over the widespread scene before them, the afternoon light turning his eyes to little pools of gold. "Of course," he said, simply, "a man who is not brave is surely as horrible as a woman who isn't good."

There was a pause, and then Cuckoo went on slowly, urged by a strong wish to know what he thought, "But—

surely you yourself have not—you have not done much to help women be good?"

He did not move, and she saw that he was frowning, not so much angrily as thoughtfully. "I know what you mean, of course," he answered at length, "but you see, you don't exactly see what I mean by goodness."

"It is obvious that I don't. Won't you tell me?"

He took her hand and kissed it gently. "My dear," he said, "I am an old man and I love women—all of them. I have known a few good ones, but by good I mean something I can't quite explain. Only one thing is really expressible. I mean by the word good something much more than mere physical virtue. I mean, possibly chiefly, kindness of mind as well as kindness of heart; and I mean fairness of vision; and forgivingness—ah, I mean many things!

"But to get back to my story. That first Peregrine Janeways fell in love one day with a girl who was the daughter of a neighbor of his master. And the girl—I hope her name was Mary—seemed to him so good, so perfect, that he set his mind to finding some gift he could give her.

"According to his Ligurian legend, saffron was the best of gifts, and saffron he would give the maid he loved. So he bought gold and wrought a little bag, and in the mesh he wove topazes—probably because they were cheap—and he walked to a garden in the country and picked saffron leaves, and put them into the bag and gave it to his sweetheart——"

"And the bag now hangs on a beautiful diamond chain and you own it, and I have had it in my hands!"

At Cuckoo's words he turned and stared at her in ludicrous surprise.

"What do you mean?" he cried.

And she told him *her* story: of the day her uncle had

bought her a string of pearls, and how the salesman had showed them the odd jewel. When he had expressed his amazement at the curious hazard, he told the rest of the story.

"It was my great, great grandmother, also, curiously enough, a Genoese, who revived our interest in the little bag, and her husband had the chain made for it. It's a funny little thing, isn't it?"

"It's delightful. But who wears it, and what did you mean about Sister Marie Séraphine?"

There was a little pause, and then he answered both questions.

"Each Janeways—each eldest son—gives it during his life to some woman. But never, no matter what happens, to more than one. So you see one must be pretty sure about the one woman, and—about one's own feelings about her. I was perfectly sure that Marie Aumonier was the best woman I had ever met or ever should meet. It was only of myself that I was not sure."

"That, of course," Cuckoo said very softly, "was why she went into the convent?"

"Yes. She told me years after. It's so long ago now that it's like talking of some other man—she did love me, and she knew that I was not sure, so she engaged herself to poor Xavier and then, at the last minute——"

"She could not marry him and became a nun."

After a time Janeways spoke again. "My mother was the last woman round whose neck that chain has hung, and I have no son. When I die I shall have the bag—not the chain—buried with me."

Then he rose, gave himself a shake and laughed. "So there is the history of the Bag of Saffron! Come, Mrs. Loxley—by the way, what is your name? It can't be Nicky!"

"Nicoleta. I have Italian blood, too."

"Good. I thought you had. Come, then, Madame Nicoleta, let us get back to our coach——"

Cuckoo did not ask herself why she had not told him who she was, even that Loxley and not Locksley, as he had assumed, was her name. He had sent her flowers addressed to Mrs. Locksley, and thus she knew why he did not associate her with his old acquaintance, the Vicar of Widdybank; and there seemed to her to lie in her incognito a safeguard against some as yet undeclared danger.

That evening she wrote to George, telling him simply that she was visiting the Countess, who was an old friend of Lady Pelter's, and that she had met Sir Peregrine Janeways. "He is," she added, "a charming old thing——"

CHAPTER XXVI

MARGUERITE LENSKY was a very nice woman in many ways, and despite her little external vulgarities, she had what Cuckoo in self-communion called a very decent mind. She had the delicacy of not asking questions, and it was her stopping teasing her young guest about Sir Peregrine Janeways' attentions that first opened Cuckoo's eyes to the fact that the old beau really meant anything beyond a delightful and romantic friendship. At first, all of the little coterie had chaffed her about Il Magnifico, and what was worse, some of them had even ventured to chaff her under Janeways' very nose. That organ, however, remained so blandly unconscious of the very possibility of anyone's taking such a liberty with it, that even Lady Vaux soon gave up making remarks that were meant to pique him.

One very wet afternoon, the Countess and her guest were sitting in a little smoking-room hung with crimson Florentine brocade, waiting for dressing-time. The Countess, who was very tired, wore an elaborate tea-gown, and Cuckoo felt ashamed of herself for noting that her kind friend's outline under the meager disguise of the tea-gown was, in its uncorseted state, not unlike Aunt Marcia's. The Countess lay on a *chaise-longue*, smoking and polishing her nails; Cuckoo sat on the rug by the fire, her head against one of the big easy-chairs. The Countess had just finished the story of her own marriage to Paul Lensky and of the inevitable breaking of that more or less sacred tie.

"He would have cleaned me out," she wound up, "in

another two years. My trustees did hate him like poison, but he managed to get money out of them. It was a real gift with him——"

Cuckoo nodded. "So in reality you just paid him off?"

"I did. I give him a fairly good income now, you know. Poor old Paul; I'm sort of fond of him in spite of everything. He seems to be quite happy trotting about with little Minnas and Josephines, as he calls them. He came to see me not long ago, and I was real glad to hear his voice. He stayed to dinner and we had a long talk—but, my! I was glad when he went."

After a minute she added with a good-natured laugh, "And so was he, I suppose! Well, that's my little lot. Now suppose you tell me about your husband, Nicky."

Cuckoo had for a long time been expecting just this conversation, and she was prepared for it.

"There's very little to tell," she said; "he's a delightful person, but we shouldn't have married; not enough money, and we're both too nervous. George ought to have married a woman like a feather pillow, and I—well, I don't know whom I should have married—nobody, if I'd had any money."

The Countess glanced at her curiously. "Do you really mean that?" she said. "You English women lie so horribly about that kind of thing. Now, as for me, I'm always in love with somebody—even now when I'm really far enough to know better, and English women are certainly much more loving than we are. Even poor Queenie—and everybody knows about her love affairs—lies like a whale; pretends she never cared for anybody but Warrenden."

Cuckoo stared into the fire. "I certainly cared for George," she said slowly, "although, from what I have seen of other people, I'm not sure that I was in love with him."

"And you never cared for anybody else?"

"Never."

"Well," said the Countess, "I'd rather die in a ditch than be like that. I'd like to see your husband. Have you got a picture of him?"

Cuckoo had, and fetched it from her room. It was a large, well-taken photograph in a leather frame, and the Countess looked at it for a long while in silence.

"Nice boy he looks," she declared at length. "Young, isn't he?"

"He's twenty-five."

"Beautiful eyes; looks a little delicate, doesn't he? Perhaps he's just a little too tame for you, Nicky?"

Cuckoo reflected. Tame was not exactly the word, but she didn't know how to better it. She would not have minded telling the whole truth to this common, noisy American woman, for the common, noisy American was kind, and sincere, and really sympathetic. But Cuckoo had not learned the whole truth about herself and George, so she took the photograph and put it on the table.

"He isn't tame," she said, "he's a dear, really. Sometimes I think it's just that I'm not good enough for him."

The Countess sat up suddenly.

"Then you *don't* get on well together?" she cried, with the joy of one who is justified in an intuition.

"Not very. You see, we're poor, and we're too much together, and we're both nervous and we get on each other's nerves, I think."

The telephone bell rang in the library close at hand, and the Countess rose to go to it.

"That's sure to be Juan," she said. "Look here, Nicky," she added, putting her hand on the younger woman's shoulder, and speaking, despite her make-up and her dyed hair, in an earnest, motherly way. "Give your-

self another chance. Don't get too involved with Pelly Janeways, or anyone else. You and George are both young, and after all, marriage *does* mean something. Perhaps"—and her over-red face saddened suddenly—"you may have a child some day, and that would make it all right. I believe it would have made things all right even for Paul and me. Oh, damn," she went on suddenly to the telephone bell, as she lumbered across the floor towards it. "Do shut up, I'm coming."

They dined with Janeways that night, in his *appartement* in the Avenue de Bois. The only other guest was a Greek, who, because his name was Diamantopoulos, was usually known as Mantepop, and the dinner in the quiet, sober, dining-room, served by grave French servants, seemed to Cuckoo an amazing change from the dinners that had of late fallen to her lot. Janeways was a little distrait, and Mantepop, who never had been known to stop talking, carried on his flow of conversation almost uninterruptedly. Janeways had engaged a box at the Folies Bergères, and after coffee they went on there. Mantepop devoted himself to the Countess, who shrieked with laughter over his whispered tales and called him a *sale type*, evidently under the impression that this phrase was one of great elegance; and Cuckoo and Janeways, both tired, both for some reason a little out of spirits, hardly spoke to each other. The program was not a particularly exciting one, and Janeways, who was always bored at music-halls, looked as nearly cross as Cuckoo had ever seen him. The evening bade fair to be very dull, but towards its middle an unexpected diversion was the arrival in the box, or, to speak more accurately, the "pen" in which Janeways and his party were sitting, of two men and two ladies. They came in very quietly, and Cuckoo, who was sitting with her back to the box, didn't notice them. But after a while she straightened in her chair

and listened. It was Bertie Fabricius' voice speaking behind her, and Bertie Fabricius had not yet seen her or her companions, for he was seated with his back to their box, thus facing the stage. At that moment Janeways, who had gone to speak to some friend, made his way back towards his place, and one of the ladies with Fabricius asked who he was.

"Oh, that's Janeways, the chap they call The Magnificent," Bertie explained, as Janeways came quietly into the box and sat down almost behind him. "You must have heard of him, Mrs. Grant." Mrs. Grant craned her neck and looked off to the left.

"Of course, I have heard of him—where's he gone? Has he run away with anybody lately?"

Cuckoo, leaning back, could feel Janeways' breath on her shoulders, so closely were they packed in the tiny place. Fabricius laughed, of course in perfect ignorance of the fact that Janeways, by stretching out his hand, could have touched him.

"I don't know," he said; "he's not so much in the public eye as he used to be. He's a most delightful fellow. He must be getting on, you know, and you can't expect the man to go on coveting his neighbor's wife for ever."

"It must be horrid," Mrs. Grant returned in a perfectly kind voice, "for a man of that type to grow old. I've often thought how dreadful it must be for very beautiful women of the corresponding kind, when they begin to lose their charm and power, but for a man it must be almost worse. I remember when I was a girl hearing my mother talk about Pelly Janeways, as she called him. She was devoted to him and never would hear a word against him. I believe he has hosts of friends."

Bertie shrugged his shoulders, and Cuckoo knew from his voice that he was annoyed. "Oh, yes, he was always a popular man, to give the devil his due; but the funny

part is that of all the women he has ill-treated—and there must have been hundreds—not one has ever made real trouble for him, and nearly all of them have remained his friends. What a very dull show this is!"

After a minute Mrs. Grant went on. "If we should chance to meet him as we go out, do introduce him to me, Sir Hubert."

Cuckoo started. If Bertie were Sir Hubert, poor old Uncle Adolph must be gone, and it was only a few weeks since she had seen him following his wife to the car that night. Bertie, she reflected angrily, had not lost much time in mourning. And then came the thought that if Fabricius had married her she would have been rich now—enormously rich. By leaning back she could catch a glimpse of her cousin's right profile as he bent towards pretty, fluffy Mrs. Grant. The two years had not improved him. The back of his neck was very red and bulged over the top of his collar. Cuckoo noticed it, but knew it would have made no difference to her. With all her soul she wished she had married him.

Sir Peregrine had not spoken since coming into the box, and she knew that, whereas it might have amused some men to embarrass the neighboring chatterers, he, with his old-fashioned courtesy, would be distressed if they should find out that he was there; so she took his lead and remained silent, and it may be doubted whether even Janeways ever knew how much depended on Mrs. Grant's next remark.

"By the way, how old must Pelly Janeways be—nearly seventy, isn't he?"

Cuckoo heard Peregrine Janeways draw himself up behind her and, urged by a simple and absolutely innocent impulse of sympathy, she reached her hand towards him. He took it in his for a moment, and ground her fingers together in a grip that hurt.

"No," Fabricius said indifferently, as the lights went up and he directed his glasses on somebody on the other side of the box. "He can't be that old, but he's well over sixty. His career as Don Juan must be about over. I wonder if he realizes," the younger man went on, "that he's a back number?"

Cuckoo felt her hand gently released, and the next second the door of the box clicked and Janeways had gone. A few minutes later, during an interval, he came in, rather noisily, and said to Cuckoo:

"Excuse me, dear Donna Nicoleta, for having left you. I hope you haven't been bored?" Cuckoo knew that Bertie had heard his voice, and that when she spoke he must recognize hers; and she was not above giving a belated dig at the man who had abused her before his mother's butler.

"I haven't been bored at all, Sir Peregrine," she said; "in fact, I've something rather amusing to tell you."

Janeways sat down.

The guilty pair in the next box sat very still, waiting. The game was in Sir Peregrine's hands, and nobly and deftly he played it. Leaning behind Cuckoo he tapped his neighbor on the back.

"Surely that's you, Fabricius?" he said cordially. "How are you, my dear fellow?" He had never called Bertie Fab "my dear fellow" before in his life, and Bertie Fab knew it. The two men shook hands, and then Janeways was introduced to Mrs. Grant, who, dreadfully confused and remorseful, was quite pretty enough to reward his generosity in going into her box for a moment. While they talked Bertie found courage to turn to his cousin.

"Look here, Cuckoo," he said, without any preliminaries, "you surely wouldn't be such a beast as to tell him?"

"Tell him what?" Cuckoo asked innocently.

"Oh, what we were saying while he was out of the box."

"He wasn't out of the box."

"Do you mean he heard?"

"Every word, my dear cousin."

Bertie was visibly shaken.

"By Jove!" he muttered.

"Did you get my letter?" he went on after a second. "I sent it to the bank because I didn't know your address."

"Your letter? No."

Bertie lowered his voice.

"My poor father died on the eighteenth of this month, and just before the end he asked me to give you a message."

"Oh, Bertie," she burst out, "I *am* so sorry; really and truly sorry. The eighteenth—the last day I was in town. I did love him, you know."

"I believe you did—and he was very fond of you. He never got over that—that business. But he never said one word against you, Nicky. Where are you staying? Can I come and see you?"

She was about to say yes, and then she realized how little she wished any conversation about her to take place between her cousin and Janeways.

"I don't think there would be any good in your coming to see me. My husband is in Cyprus and I am visiting the Countess Lensky for a few weeks. Can't you tell me now what the message is?"

"All right, just as you like. It was only to give you his love and to say that he hoped you would be happy, and something about something you returned to him—that he knew it was not your fault. I think that's what he meant; that he knew it wasn't your fault."

"I see. I'm glad he said that. Thank you for telling me." Then she said in a lower voice, "I'm very tired. I'm going to ask the Countess if she'd mind going home."

Bertie looked at her. He was wondering wherein had lain her enormous charm for him, and she could see him wondering.

"How's Aunt Marcia?" she asked.

"Oh, she's fairly fit, although the shock was very great. I'm taking her down to Hyères to-morrow. That's why I'm here. Oh, Cuckoo, I forgot to tell you—father left you five hundred pounds."

She gave a little gasp. "Oh, Bertie, how kind of him!"

"Yes. He saw Loxley not long ago and thought he looked very seedy, and I think he had an idea that you might like to get him to a good climate——"

At this juncture Janeways rose, and shaking hands with Mrs. Grant and the other woman in her party, came back to his own box. He had heard Cuckoo talking to Fabricius, but had not caught any of their words, and when the Countess, who really had a headache, suggested to him that they might as well go now before the general exodus, he bowed gravely and they made their way out to where his car was waiting for them.

"You must come back with me," he said, "and I'll make you some real Turkish coffee. It's only a little after eleven——"

For some reason Cuckoo had, at his words, a sudden extremely clear vision of Aunt Flora and Aunt Effie going up their narrow stairs at Roseroofs at sharp ten o'clock, each with her bedroom candle lighted in her hand.

Janeways made the coffee himself over a little lamp on a beaten brass tray in his big library, Cuckoo sitting by him, while Marguerite and the still steadily talking Mantepop sat on a distant sofa, where, she said, the light would not hurt her eyes. Janeways had given her aspirin, and she lay back very comfortably, not even listening to the unceasing sound of her companion's words. That

was the beauty of Mantepop—one didn't have to listen to him.

Janeways, Cuckoo saw, was pale, and the lines from his nose to the corners of his mouth seemed deeper. It was clear, in a way pathetically clear, that the conversation in the next box had hurt him. Cuckoo was sincerely sorry for him; for all his age and vast experience, he reminded her, as he carefully stirred his coffee after damping it with a little rose-water, of a hurt child.

"Wasn't it funny," she said, with an apparent lack of tact that covered a really kindly impulse, "Bertie Fabricius talking such nonsense?"

He bent over the smoking brass pot until she could only see his beautiful white hair. Then he looked slowly up at her through the steam, and his eyes were full of anguished questioning.

"Would anybody," he asked, "*really* take me for seventy?"

Cuckoo laughed. "Never! I'm a fairly good guesser of ages, and I never would have taken you for more than fifty."

His face cleared a little.

"Honor bright?" he asked.

"Honor bright."

"But you, you see," he said mournfully, "you are clever. You don't judge me entirely by my hair, as most people judge their fellow-creatures."

"No," she said cheerfully. "I think I judge you more by the way you move—and then by your hands——"

He held one of his hands up, and looked at it critically.

"Yes," he said. "It's certainly not the hand of a back number——"

He took Cuckoo's hand, and, hid from the others as they were by the projecting corner of a splendid Coromandel screen, kissed it. It seemed to her afterwards,

looking back on that moment, as if his kiss had begun as one of simple gratitude and friendship, but it ended differently.

Suddenly he drew her to him, took her in his arms, and kissed her.

"I love you," he said hoarsely, "my little red-lipped Nicoleta, I love you."

CHAPTER XXVII

PEREGRINE JANEWAYS was a perfectly honest man, not only did he never try to deceive others, but he never attempted the far more usual and subtle form of deceit of trying to deceive himself.

Therefore, the day after his declaration to Nicoleta Locksley, as he called her, he sat down in his study and deliberately and honestly thought things out. He had made his declaration, spurred not only by the feeling that for days had been growing within him, but also and even more, by the shock he had sustained in hearing little Mrs. Grant suggest that he must be seventy. He had never condescended to the absurdity of trying to be younger than he was, but he had to the full realized that he was, so to speak, younger than he was. In no way but the whitening of his abundant hair had the approach of age manifested itself in him; his eyes were as bright as ever, his teeth were perfect, his immense physical strength practically unimpaired.

And what meant, in reality, more than these things, his mental vitality was as remarkable as ever. He could learn things by heart as easily as he had done in his childhood; his memory was excellent; his interest in people and in events as keen as it had been in his twenties.

He had not been vain of these remarkable advantages, for they had always been his as much as had his faculty of indefatigability, or the iron strength of his hands; but he had been aware of them, and unconsciously he had expected other people to be aware of them as well.

Every human being inclines to regard his or her self

more or less as an exception from the general run of humanity, but Janeways was in truth an exception and had always known it.

And now this fat Fabricius fellow, bloated and coarsened and degenerated by drink and other excesses, this man just over forty, whom he, Janeways, could undoubtedly double up and throw downstairs if he wished to, had relegated him to the category of worn-out old men; to the class of men whose life lies behind them, while they accumulate dust and cobwebs on the shelf whence they will descend only to exchange it for the hardly duller grave!

Never in his life had he had such a blow, and in the very tremor of anger that the blow roused in him had he received his unmistakable sign that he *was* an old man. Not so would his blood have shaken his heart a few years ago; not so would his breath have failed him. He remembered the sensation almost of giddiness that had beset him as he walked up and down the foyer after his unheard exit from the box. He had had to wipe his brow, he recollected, and he had seen his own hands tremble.

These manifestations were the manifestations of the old age of a man, who, though he had been able a few minutes later to go back into the box, speak to his traducer, and carry the whole thing off with a high manner, had yet had to make a tremendous effort to do it!

And this fact, he saw clearly, proved that the objectionable and out-of-condition Bertie Fabricius had not been his traducer after all. Bertie Fabricius had been his illuminator, his elucidator, his mirror, all at once.

It rained, as it had rained the day before, and Janeways sat in his pleasant, firelit study all the afternoon, wounded to the soul, hurt as he had never been hurt, in his vanity, his pride of manhood, even in his pride of intellect, for had not his failing to recognize what was so

clear to that ass Fabricius been a sign that his brain had indeed lost something of its vigor?

Giulio, his valet, a small, dark, surly Italian, who rarely spoke but always saw, twice came into the room on some pretext, and looked at his master with eyes of anxiety.

"Is the Signore well?" he asked the second time.

Janeways' gloom softened a little as he looked at the surly little fellow.

"No, Giulio," he answered sadly. "Not well. I've been"—he tapped his broad chest—"*Mi duole il cuore*——"

Englishman as he regarded himself, he could not have said in English that his heart ached, but to this Italian it came natural to him to say it in Italian.

Giulio nodded. "Courage," he said, "it is only that we are not, you and I, sir, as young as we once were——"

So, then, the little dried-up servant had had more sense than his master. Giulio had known that they were growing old, the pair of them, while he, Janeways, had overlooked his age as a trifling matter!

"Yes, Giulio"—he said, after a pause, "that is it, and I don't like it. *Accidente*," he broke out in sudden anger, "I don't want to grow old. I've been young all my life!"

Giulio nodded. "The signore," he declared, with a respectful confidence that is characteristic of the best class of Italian servants, "should have grown children—masculines and feminines. One of his feminines could be a grandmother herself, these days when they marry young—then *il signore* would not have to sit alone on a day of rain, and dream without profit——"

Janeways stared at him for a moment. Not only a grandfather might he be, but a great-grandfather!

Giulio watched him with patient, loving eyes.

Suddenly Janeways burst into a gale of laughter that literally shook him as a gale of wind shakes a tree.

Giulio's idea of comfort struck him as very absurd, but his own dismay at the realization of his potential great-grandfatherhood was funnier still.

He lay back in his chair and laughed until his eyes were wet.

"You are right, *mascalzone*," he cried, at last, "I am old, old, old! My great-grandchildren might indeed be crawling round me—there on the carpet behind you they might be——"

Giulio turned seriously and glanced down, as if he expected to see little ghosts sporting in the firelight, and then Janeways dismissed him with a friendly word, and was alone.

He felt better for his laugh, for the first shock of his awful discovery was over and, like all resolutely faced troubles, it dwindled as he looked at it. *Bon!* he was an old man. But—and vanity rushed, in its pleasant and endearing way, to the rescue—he was of all old men, the strongest and most vigorous.

What other man of his age, he reflected, rising and walking up and down the room, could have felt as young as he did last night when he kissed Nicoleta Loxley!

She, it was plain, did not think him old. How she had blushed!

It was true that Cuckoo had blushed, but it was not altogether, if at all, through emotion. It was vanity that brought the color so violently to her face! The great Pelly Janeways loved her, and she triumphed in the thought. Up to that moment she had seen in his devotion nothing more than a pleasant event in her life, but as he kissed her there stirred in her the germ of an idea that was destined to grow with amazing rapidity.

For his part he had kissed her partly out of gratitude for her belief in his youth, partly out of the sincere though

ephemeral passion that was still strong in him, and partly to demonstrate to himself that Fabricius was an ass.

These motives he acknowledged to himself with his customary honesty, as he walked up and down in his darkening room.

Until that evening Cuckoo had seemed to him almost a child; a child with a peculiarly subtle, caviar-to-the-general kind of charm. He had been a little in love with her, but no idea of loving her seriously had entered his head. She was one of the numerous young wives with invisible and obviously unsatisfactory husbands, who never seem to deny themselves the gratification of any desultory emotions that come their way, and he had liked her and had not regarded her as a possible victim any more than he regarded her as a possible victimizer. He himself had never been a flirt; flirting he regarded as a peculiarly unpleasant and ignoble amusement. He was a Lover, not a player at love, and he despised those who did play at it.

For women who encouraged men to lose their heads and then turned on them and rended them, he had ugly words, and feigning any emotion honestly seemed to him an utterly abominable thing. His code of morals was peculiar, but he was sincere in his devotion to it.

As he walked about, the telephone-bell rang, and he seated himself at the table where it stood. It was a woman's voice, which at first he didn't recognize, asking if he was at home.

"Who shall I say wishes to speak to Sir Peregrine Janeways?" he asked.

"Mrs. Loxley." Cuckoo's voice sounded very nervous and strained. There was in it more emotion than he had ever heard in it, and to his amazement she had rung up to ask him to drive her out into the country somewhere to dinner.

"I'll take you with pleasure," he returned, "but you know it's pouring."

"I don't care. I want to get out of Paris for a few hours, and I don't care whether I get wet or not. Couldn't we have dinner at one of those little restaurants you spoke of the other night? And, if you don't mind, I'll come for you. I'll come in a fiacre. Will you have the car at the door, for of course I can't go up——"

Janeways, who had always been a very abstemious man, rang for a brandy-and-soda. He would never again allow himself to forget that he was nearly sixty-two years old. People like Fabricius should never again have a chance of jeering at him for his assumption of youth—but he was not old as he made his arrangements by telephone for dining at a little restaurant on the way to Fontainebleau. He was a man, amongst other qualities, of extreme mental delicacy. He wouldn't, for instance, take a woman whom he liked and respected to dine where he had formerly taken a woman whom he had liked but had *not* respected. There were, scattered about the world, some dozens of spots, village inn or isolated house, each of which was to his memory a half-forgotten but undesecrated little shrine. Since a woman he had once loved had died in Dresden, he had never set foot in the town; and there was a remote cottage in Cornwall where he did go very semi-occasionally and where he always went alone, and whence he came with a beautiful look of reverence on his fine face. So he hesitated for some time before deciding on a restaurant for Cuckoo.

Les Terrasses was a delightful place, and the cook was a personal friend of his, but to Les Terrasses he had not very long ago pilgrimaged with a very delightful and witty lady to whom he would not for the world have introduced the little Nicoleta. So Les Terrasses was out of the question. A little further on there was an old farmhouse

where the woman made a wonderful omelette in a wonderful old kitchen, but the last time he had been there some years before he had been accompanied by a poor creature of whose all-too-lasting affection he had proved miserably unworthy, so that farm must remain sacred to her. Presently, however, he remembered a little restaurant on the Fontainebleau road where he had once been with a party that had neither sanctified nor desecrated it. Hither he would take Nicoleta. He ordered his car, wrote one or two notes, and sat down to wait.

Cuckoo, despite the very unusual frame of mind she was in, had no idea of precipitating matters by talking about them. So she told Marguerite Lensky that she was going to dine with her aunt, Lady Fabricius, at Meurice's; and that she was to go to the station to see her and her son off for the South afterwards.

When the fiacre stopped at the big white house in the Avenue de Bois, Janeways' big gray touring car, with its hood up, already stood there, and when he saw her, Janeways' chauffeur approached the window.

"You are the lady who has come for Sir Peregrine Janeways? I am to ring the lift-bell and he will come down at once——"

Cuckoo, who had been trembling with rage and desire for revenge for hours, felt her liking for Janeways kindle into something more vital as he came down the steps. He looked so big, so sure of himself, so far above the miserable jangle of nerves that made George Loxley so difficult to live with. He settled her in the car, put a hot-water bottle to her feet, poked a red leather cushion behind her, got in himself, and off they started.

Cuckoo didn't explain why she had telephoned him, nor make any of the usual apologies, for the reason that these things didn't seem worth while, and he for his part asked no questions, but they were very glad to be together;

each was to the other an antidote to a miserable poison; and each liked the other the more because the other was so eminently likeable.

There was a blaze of color in Cuckoo's irregular little face and her tear-washed eyes were brilliant. Janeways could have kissed her feet in gratitude for the feeling she roused in him.

"My dear," he said, "it is good to be with you."

She looked at him with a penetrating expression. "It is good to be with *you*," she said. "I have been so angry —so angry, and I knew at once that only you could help me."

"Tell me—how can I help you?"

"Only just by being—you. You are so sure and so resolute and so sincere."

These were odd characteristics for a young woman to pick out to praise in any man who had told her he loved her. The choice appealed to Janeways; although love in its various manifestations could never lose its charm for him, he had been surfeited at last; a little overfed with expressions both of uncontrollable passion and the momentary, delightful sweetness that almost invariably changes into insipidity. This little thing was reasoning; she was making definite use of him in her mental need, and this for some reason he liked.

The big car ran smoothly along through the rain and Janeways, though he did not forget that he was an old man, realized that only outsiders—people who didn't know—could doubt his wonderful youth.

They dined, despite the rain, in a little arbor of unbarked logs, looking over what would have been a ditch anywhere else, but which, in the curious, cultivated atmosphere of artificiality that prevails in establishments of the kind in France, had taken on the charms of a wild and unfathomable ravine.

The rain had stopped, and the smell of fresh, clean pine needles came down to them from the cluster of pine trees round and under which the garden was made. The idea of dining outside at the end of November pleased Cuckoo, and Janeways, to his own gratification, had arrived at the point with greater suddenness than he was used to but quite as conclusively, that it didn't matter to him where he was as long as Nicoleta was there too. Their dinner was excellent and they drank champagne, which Cuckoo loved as a débutante loves it, not only in a gustatory, but also in a symbolic way. Champagne to her meant high festival with undeniable dissipation thrown in; it also meant forgetfulness of unpleasant, and a rosy appreciation of pleasant, things.

At last, as they drank their coffee, she told him the story of her day.

"I've had a letter," she said, "from my husband—he's in Cyprus—ordering me to go back to England."

"Well? Why shouldn't you? You'd be in London, of course?"

"Should I? I'd be," she declared, with intense bitterness, "buried in the depths of the country with two old women and not a single neighbor."

"Why does your husband want you to go to such an impossible place? Doesn't he like Marguerite Lensky? Marguerite is a thoroughly good sort and much better than many who criticize her manners."

"Oh, it isn't that. He doesn't know her. He thinks it isn't right that a young woman should be in Paris without her husband."

At the fierceness of the sneer in her voice, Janeways looked at her sharply.

"Who is he? What is he? Tell me about him."

"He's a painter—he paints rather badly. He's—a very nice man," she added, with unwilling, but very effec-

"You must come," he said, "my little Nicoleta."

tive justice. "He's furious because I came here. *Such* a letter!"

Sir Peregrine naturally felt the unholy joy that any man in his position would have felt. But he, too, had a sense of justice.

"Why did he go to Cyprus and leave you?" he asked.

Cuckoo groaned. "Oh, to earn money. I made him go." She sat in the corner of the little arbor, Janeways on her right. To all intents and purposes they were quite alone, and the wind in the pine trees made a soft, sylvan accompaniment to their voices.

"You see," Cuckoo went on, as Janeways took her hand and kissed it, "I had a string of pearls given to me by my uncle."

"Who was your uncle?" he interrupted.

"He's dead. And when I couldn't stand things any more, I sold the pearls, and that was the money that brought me here. George says that it was an outrageous thing to do; but the pearls were mine, and came from my uncle, and I don't see it was any of his business."

Janeways didn't answer, for the reason that he *did* think it her husband's business if his wife, without telling him, sold her jewels. He was in love with Cuckoo—he was growing more in love with her every moment, but his love was not so spontaneous or so irresistible as to destroy, as it might have done a few years before, his sense of proportion and truth. He was, although he only half knew it, encouraging himself to be recklessly in love with this strange, unbeautiful, fascinating little woman. As he did not know what to say about the pearls, he played the trump card of lovers. He kissed her, and then, quite beautifully and naturally, he lost his head and made violent love to her. He meant every word he said, just as he had always meant every word he said. He *did* feel that the only thing to be done was for her to come away

with him; he *was* sure—and this he had a good reason for—that he could make her happy. He had made many and many a woman happy, and he knew just how to do it.

Cuckoo did not lose her head, though he saw that she was very much stirred by his sincere passion; and the fact that her brain, although a brain of no particular weight or profundity, was so well balanced added vastly to her charm for him.

"I can't decide anything to-night," she said at last. "It's all so horribly sudden, and if George hadn't been so idiotic about the pearls I probably shouldn't have felt like this at all."

"Then you *do* feel—like this?"

Cuckoo looked at him levelly.

"I am not sure," she said, with her marvelous instinct for knowing how to manage him, "that I love you at all, but I hate my husband, and you are good and kind to me, and—well, every woman likes to be loved."

That was the utmost satisfaction she would give him, and as they drove back she sat quite quietly, staring out into the dark, while he beside her had utterly forgotten his preoccupation about his age and his youth; his heart was thumping in his big chest; he was as much in love as he had been any time in the last twenty years.

Cuckoo's anger with George was so sincere, so virulent, that she was by this time almost too tired to think, and when at last the car stopped at the Countess's apartment, she sat still for a moment while Janeways leaned on the side of the car.

"Trust me," he said. "I'll take you to India, Italy—anywhere you like. I'll be very good to you."

She leaned towards him, her exhausted little face very white in the arc-light overhead.

"It all seems like a dream," she said slowly. "Perhaps it is one. I'll have to think, you know. I'm so

alone; I haven't any relations except a couple of old aunts who can't live long, so my life is my own as far as that's concerned. But—it seems a dreadful thing to do."

It was raining again and the street was, fortunately, quite deserted. Janeways' face was very white. He looked supremely handsome.

"You must come," he said, "my little Nicoleta."

Taking off his hat, he leaned towards her.

"Kiss me."

A man passed them, struggling with his umbrella for the wind had come up, and Janeways started back. She had kissed him and he was very happy; they shook hands and she went in to the brightly lit hall.

The Countess was out, for it was almost eleven o'clock, and Cuckoo went straight to her room. She was almost asleep when a knock came at her door and a note was brought to her.

DEAR CUCKOO [the note said],

Happening to pass the Countess Lensky's house just now, it was my misfortune to see you parting from that old scoundrel Janeways. I thought last night that something was up and now I know. It is no business of mine, but someone is sure to tell Loxley, so this is just to give you a friendly warning. The five hundred pounds my father left you will be sent to your bank in the course of a day or two.

Yours sincerely,

HUBERT FABRICIUS.

Cuckoo read the note two or three times, and then put it away in her writing-case. She knew Bertie well enough to realize that although he might mean not to tell what he had seen, he was certain at some time or other to let it slip out. So her answer to Janeways was pretty well decided before she went to sleep.

PART III

Two Years and a Half Pass

CHAPTER XXVIII

TARRING-PEVERELL stood on a long, slanting stretch of ground that, spreading between the uplands and the dale, was sheltered to the north and east by abrupt heights, and more closely wooded round than was usual in that part of Yorkshire.

The house itself looked as if it had been carried up from the south and planted there in the moorland as an architectural example by some god of ornate taste. Instead of being like its neighbors, a sober rectangular gray stone building, it was an almost perfect specimen of the Palladian.

One of Janeways' idiosyncrasies being never to allow anything he owned to get out of repair or even to degenerate into superficial shabbiness, the house was always dazzling in its whiteness and shone through the trees rather like a huge bride-cake. There were, moreover, very large and beautiful gardens, and even when its owner stayed away for three or four years at a time the staff of gardeners was never diminished.

The present Peregrine Janeways' grandfather, an enthusiastic and scientific horticulturist, had spent an incredible sum of money on the gardens, and the park boasted a great number of rare trees, both foreign and native. This old Sir Peregrine had also caused walls to be built, some of them twelve or fifteen feet high, to break the onrush of the keen northern winds. At the foot of what was known as the Marble Terrace, an expensive caprice of the Janeways of Charles I's day, the gardening Janeways had made a sunken garden, from whose mellow

depths rose on all sides broad, shallow steps of the same marble as the Terrace. Here grew the famous Tarring-Peverell roses, and there was a saying in the countryside that under the marble steps ran a cunning series of hot pipes that tempered the air always, even in the depths of winter.

In the center of the sunken garden was a little fountain with a very beautiful Cupid who stood with drooping wings, bending over the bubbling water as if about to drink from it. What seemed miles of herbaceous borders stretched in all directions for more than twenty acres of garden-land, and in one of the greenhouses there grew, in a deep basin, pink lotus flowers from the Summer Palace near Pekin.

The original Janeways, whose story the present man had told Cuckoo Loxley that evening in Paris, had had a shop in Cheapside, so the story went, and for several generations his descendants had been nothing more than clever goldsmiths. But gradually they had risen in the world and had evolved not only into fine artists but, what was far more important for the well-being of their future garden in Yorkshire, extremely astute business men.

Their baronetcy dated almost from the very first batch of James I., and henceforth they were, as a family, important, not only through their wealth which grew without ceasing and which, oddly enough, never underwent any marked fluctuations because of the various wars in which they took different sides, but also because of a certain very pronounced though indescribable charm which they possessed, almost to a man. They made great marriages, they made enormously wealthy marriages, and whenever one wished to do so, he married a woman of no birth and of no money. A star must have danced when the first Janeways was born, so almost unbrokenly fortunate had their line been. But now their line was on the point of

extinction, and two people who, one evening in June, stood outside the drawing-room window on the top of the first flight of marble steps of which the beautiful Italian Terrace was composed, were thinking of this unfortunate fact. It was a beautiful evening and the sun was still high in the heavens, so that the old house almost glittered against its background of trees. Far down below in the valley, the little river glittered back at it, and a church-bell was ringing half a mile or so away.

Miss Effie and Miss Flora Plues, both arrayed in unusual splendor, stood looking off to the westward, for over there towards the setting sun lay Roseroofs, and the two old ladies, unused to being from home, were a little homesick, though neither would for worlds have said so to the other.

"It is all very splendid, Flora," Miss Effie said, her eyes resting on a little statue of a running girl, who, to her, seemed insufficiently clothed. "I've never seen such a beautiful house."

Miss Flora nodded. "Aye, Effie. It would be a great pity if the name died out."

Miss Effie thought Miss Flora rather indelicate to make such a speech under the circumstances.

"It's odd," Miss Flora went on, "that he never had any children, considering that he has been married twice before."

They walked slowly along, past the drawing-room windows, which were open and in which lace curtains of a delicacy and softness unequaled by any they had ever seen swung gently in the breeze, and went down the steps to the side towards the sunken garden. There was a vastness about Tarring-Peverell in which the two little old ladies felt a little lost, perhaps a little chilly. They were used to less wide spaces, to protective corners, and the sunny pit that was the sunken garden seemed to

offer them, and to hold them in, a kind of warm embrace.

They sat down on the steps opposite those by which they had come, their backs to the West, and went on with their talk.

"I'm glad Lady Pelter's here, and Rachel," Miss Effie remarked, "it takes the edge off somehow."

"Yes, it does," agreed Miss Flora. "The world is changed since our day, Effie. No one seems to mind anything any more."

They looked mournfully at each other, their frosty reserve melting a little towards each other in their unavowed isolation.

Miss Flora and Miss Effie had aged considerably in the two years and a half that had passed since Cuckoo's last visit to Roseroofs. Anyone who had thought it impossible at that time for Miss Flora to grow thinner would have been obliged to recant had he seen her that evening in the rose-garden in a delicate lavender frock which had been made for her and was not a Tad (Lady Janeways did not believe in Tads), and Miss Flora's deep-violet eyes looked almost black in the ethereal whiteness of her face.

Miss Effie probably weighed to an ounce what she had weighed then. She had, or she looked as if she had, hardened and solidified by some subtle process of petrifaction.

Miss Flora's long white hands fluttered more than ever, and to this delicate demonstration was added the more menacing one of a slight tremulousness of the head.

They had been at Tarring-Peverell for something over a week, and they wanted, they wanted with all the strength of their old hearts, to go home.

"Cuckoo is most kind, isn't she?" Miss Effie said after a while.

"She's a delightful hostess," agreed Miss Flora, "and

Peregrine is perfection. We ought to be very thankful, Effie, that things have turned out so well."

Miss Effie did not answer. It was literally an impossibility for these two old sisters, living as they did always in the closest intimacy, to discuss vital and intimate things. Other people, however, were less reserved, and presently a handsome, middle-aged woman in a flowing rose colored tea-gown came down the steps towards them, a very short-skirted, knock-kneed little girl on either side of her.

This was Lady Pelter and her grandchildren, Yvette and Prunella Jackson.

"Oh, here you are!" Lady Pelter cried. "The little girls and I are taking a walk, and we thought we heard voices, didn't we, my loves? Go away and play now," she added, in quite a different voice.

Then she sat down and lighted a cigarette. It was a very warm evening and she was dressed for dinner in the delightful and comfortable way that some middle-aged ladies do dress for dinner, but Miss Effie and Miss Flora considered the display of her still beautiful arms out of place in a garden, and they regarded with horror the careful make-up of her charming face. Lady Pelter had always been of the "poor little Blanche" type. She had coaxed and petted her way through life, taking for granted all the good things that had been given her; sincerely and vociferously amazed when anything bad fell to her share. She had disliked her husband intensely, and not without reason. Her sons she was fond of, particularly Angus, who, when he had come of age, celebrated his majority by making his mother a very good allowance; and she was fond in her way of Rosamund—Rosamund the successful, Rosamund the rich, Rosamund the brilliantly and flatteringly happy. Rachel, since her marriage, her mother had not liked much. Her daughter's

very name now offended her, and it hurt her to feel that not only Rachel herself, but other people, wondered that she—Rachel's mother—did not share her good things with the Jacksons. Lady Pelter was one of those women who, with perfect good faith, can lament their poverty while wearing round their necks thousands of pounds' worth of jewels that nothing prevents their selling at any moment.

"I have come out to tell you," she said, "that I have a little scheme. Dear Peregrine has, I know, just bought some emeralds for Nicoleta. I believe he has given them to her this afternoon. Thinking about them has reminded me that I don't believe you have ever seen the most famous of the Janeways jewels—the Bag of Saffron—have you?"

The old ladies shook their heads.

"No. We have heard of it, of course," Miss Flora said, "but we've never seen it."

"I have—once," Lady Pelter went on, finishing her cigarette and lighting another, "and it's rather interesting. I've never seen Nicoleta wear it. Dear me! It's hard to call her Nicoleta, but *he* won't have her called Nicky."

"We shall always call her Cuckoo, as her mother did," put in Miss Effie with some acerbity.

"Oh, you—you could call her Messalina if you liked. He wouldn't care. Everybody knows that you two can do nothing wrong."

Miss Flora fluttered.

"No," she repeated nervously, to change the subject, "we've never seen the Bag of Saffron."

"Well, I'll ask him to-night to show it to us. I wonder he hasn't given it to Nicky already. Perhaps," she added, with the knowing air that was so extremely offensive to Miss Effie and Miss Flora, "he's waiting for

a great occasion." As neither of them spoke, she resumed, her shallow blue eyes hardening, "Although it doesn't look very much as if such an occasion were going to arise. It's two years and a half now——"

If the "occasion" was not likely to arise, Miss Effie and Miss Flora rose at that very moment.

"I think we'll go back to the house," Miss Effie said severely.

Lady Pelter gave a lazy little laugh. "I'm sorry," she said, "I really am; I didn't mean to shock you. After all, everybody knows, and it always seems to me that anything that can be done can be talked about——"

The two old ladies stood by the little Cupid, gazing down at him. At last Miss Flora raised her eyes and, looking between the wings, met Lady Pelter's gaze.

"My sister and I are very old-fashioned, Lady Pelter," she said. "It will always be a great grief to us that our niece went through that dreadful experience, and we prefer not to think of it."

Lady Pelter, who was really a perfectly good-natured woman, apologized once more.

"I am sorry, Miss Flora," she said, "and I understand. I should have hated it if it had been one of my girls. But then, you see, Peregrine is so wonderful, no one ever minds anything he does—no one ever has, and Nicky, being his, she has been forgiven as well. Granted that they had to run away with each other, surely he managed everything in the most beautiful way—staying in the East not only until it was all over, but not coming back till they'd been married over a year. It *was* clever! And then, think of the beautiful things he gives her, and those emeralds to-day. If I were you, I should really only think of the present. I'd put that other time out of my head. They have been married a year and a half, and he treats her like a queen, and everybody's coming round.

I was told a certain very great person has decided to accept her." At the unfortunate word "accept" Miss Flora blushed again and gave a little spring in her anguish. Miss Effie slipped her arm into her sister's.

"I am sure you mean very kindly, Lady Pelter," she said in her deepest, gruffest voice, "but please don't say any more. My sister and I are doing our best to take what you think such a trifle, in the wisest way. Sir Peregrine is most kind to us, and, as you say, Cuckoo has a great many jewels. In our youth we were taught that there was one jewel of far greater importance than any of these, and we can't help regretting that that one has gone from her for ever."

Lady Pelter sat and smoked as the two old ladies went slowly up the steps, their pretty frocks trailing behind them, their little backs narrower than of old and a little bent.

"Poor old things," she thought with compassion. "I do really believe they would rather have Nicky starving in a garret with that poisonous George Loxley than enjoying all this."

The two little Jackson girls, who had run away obediently to play when ordered to do so by their somewhat unsatisfactory grandmother, came running back to her with their hands full of flowers, and as she had, a few minutes before, heard the first gong go for dinner, she knew that some of the guests at least would be downstairs by the time she reached the house. So, one of her beautiful hands on each of the curly heads, she marched the little creatures up the steps and slowly along the terrace, making, she knew, a very effective picture in the westering light.

There were a good many people in the house-party, but Lady Pelter was glad when she saw that the eyes that looked appreciatively at her little group as it

reached the house were the eyes of her host himself. Janeways stood at the door, two or three dogs round him, looking down the dale with a pair of field-glasses.

"Those people are going to be late for dinner," he said. "My dear Blanche, what a delightful-looking creature you are!"

"So are you, Pelly—and this place is very becoming to you. Is Nicoleta down yet?"

"No. She went up late. She's been playing tennis with Taylor."

Together they went into the broad hall, and passing through it came out on the Terrace, to the left of which stretched back from the main body of the house the dining-room, which was the only remains of the original Tudor building, torn down by the disciple of Inigo Jones who had built the present house. Here were long chairs, and small tables covered with books and magazines and papers, and on the steps were piled cushions of blue and green peacock colors. The curtains on this side of the house were also of heavy green and blue brocade, for this was the famous Peacock Terrace, and on the grass beyond and down the steps that in their turn led to the Italian garden, minced and ambled splendid blue and green birds and their rarer brethren the milk-white peacocks that had graced Tarring-Peverell ever since Charles II.'s time. The fine birds made a beautiful pattern of weaving light in their slow and pompous perambulations on the white marble or the green grass. Lady Pelter and Janeways came down.

"Have you given Nicoleta the emeralds?" she asked curiously.

"I have."

"Does she like them?"

"She says she does."

At that moment Lady Janeways joined them. She

wore white and round her neck hung the gift—a very beautiful necklace. She had grown a little since the Paris days, and walked with a new air of assurance that was almost hardihood. Her beautifully dressed head was held markedly high, and her eyes, in which poor Miss Effie and Miss Flora had in vain looked for signs of repentance or shame, gazed out on the world from under insolently drooped eyelids.

"Haven't those people got back?" she asked sharply.

"No."

"Ridiculous! I told Kathleen I'd have no nonsense about a breakdown, and Captain Ferrier heard me say it. Absurd creatures they are! I wish they'd hurry up and marry. I can hardly bear it."

"Perhaps they've run away," suggested Lady Pelter, with her genuine blunder-headedness.

Cuckoo looked at her coldly.

"Where are the children?" she asked.

"Good gracious! *I* don't know. I forgot all about them. Pelly, did you see where they went?"

At that minute the two little girls appeared, dragged unmercifully along by their nurse. They kissed their grandmother good-night and their Auntie Nicoleta and then, with one accord, flew at their Uncle Peregrine, and tried to climb up his legs.

"Carry us upstairs, Uncle Pelly. You said you would!"

Janeways took one on each shoulder and trotted off into the great hall with them, laughing as loudly as they, in evident enjoyment.

"What a great boy he is!" Lady Pelter observed, as Cuckoo watched her husband disappear, her eyes inscrutable. "He's very fond of children, isn't he?"

Cuckoo looked at her, her expression unchanged. Then she walked slowly away without a word.

CHAPTER XXIX

LADY PELTER'S plan of asking Janeways to exhibit the Bag of Saffron did not come off that night. But two or three days later, when the very large house-party had dwindled to a small and more or less intimate one, she remembered her idea and proceeded to attempt to crystallize it. It was at lunch that she made the proposal.

"Peregrine," she said suddenly, "I've just thought of something. Do you know that Miss Effie and Miss Flora have never seen the Bag of Saffron? Do get it out and show it to us."

It was a rainy day, and everyone had been wondering how they could pass the afternoon, so that there was some excuse for Lady Pelter's suggestion. Janeways smiled.

"It isn't worth looking at," he said. "Just an ugly little gold bag with a few dry leaves in it; even the leaves are chiefly dust by this time. I think you have not been in the library, Blanche—the *real* library? That would be a good way to spend this rainy afternoon."

"Yes, it would be delightful, but do let's see the Bag of Saffron. I *have* seen it, you know, years and years ago."

He looked at her inquiringly. "Have you?"

"Yes. When I was a very young girl your mother wore it, one evening when she dined at our house, on purpose to show it to my mother. I can distinctly remember her, and that her frock was of dark blue silk, and her hair was parted in the middle."

Janeways nodded: "Yes, she was always very fond of

Lady Blois. I still have somewhere a miniature of Lady Blois that she gave my mother. By the way," he went on, with a deliberateness that took from his manner any hint of purposely changing the subject, "how is that little boy, Blois's grandson? Is he better?"

Cuckoo, from her end of the table, watched the little scene with visible amusement of a not very genial kind, and the young man on her left, a beautiful youth with an almost Greek face and rather long curly hair, asked for an explanation.

"What on earth *is* the Bag of Saffron?" he murmured.

"You've heard. It's an ugly little old family jewel."

"What's it like?" he asked.

At that moment there was a pause, and everyone heard Cuckoo's reply.

"I don't know," she said. "I've never seen the Bag of Saffron."

"Good gracious, Nicky!" burst out Rachel Jackson, "haven't you seen it? I thought you once said you saw it in some shop."

Luncheon was over, and Cuckoo gave the signal for rising.

"I saw it years ago, but only by accident," she answered quietly, "so I really have no right to any knowledge of it."

That afternoon Cuckoo took her Aunt Effie for a long drive in her own little Victoria. There were several motor-cars at Tarring-Peverell, but Lady Janeways preferred to machinery, however perfect and noiseless it might be, the pleasant patter of horses' hoofs and the easy swing of a well-made carriage. They drove several miles along the highroad towards the pass leading to Cotherdale, and when they had reached the foot of the pass Cuckoo said:

"Would you like to drive up the Pass to the Cross, Aunt Effie, and look up the dale?"

Miss Effie, who sat very erect in her place, hesitated for a moment.

"Yes, Cuckoo—I should. I haven't been so long away from home since your father first brought you to us, and I'd rather like to have a glimpse of our own moors."

The horses drew the little carriage up the steep road with no apparent effort, and in about an hour's time the two ladies got out and walked to a little natural platform above the road where an old stone cross marked some long-forgotten accident, and stood there looking round the shoulder of a hill into Cotherdale. They were very far from Warcop, but they could just see it lying like a handful of children's toys, the river twisting through it, and off to the left they could see the Edge against the sky, and just beyond their eyeshot they knew Roseroofs lay.

"You are not getting tired of staying with me, are you?" Cuckoo asked gently, as the old woman walked away from her and stood looking up the dale.

"I like being with you, Cuckoo. You are all we've got, you know, and Peregrine is most kind, but—perhaps we are both a little too old for parties." And Cuckoo knew.

On the way home she asked her aunt for news of Cotherdale, and Miss Effie, who felt vaguely encouraged by her attitude to believe that the time of their banishment might be shortened, talked of all the small events of which she learnt in Esther Oughtenshaw's letters. Benjie had broken his leg; Esther suspected Nellie, the maid, of a suitor; Judge Capel's heir had turned out to be charming and had a most beautiful little boy; Maggie Watlass of the Mill had had a stroke, so her daughter, who was in service in Cumberland, would have to come back and

look after her, and Joss Skelton had married again, the old fool, a girl from York twenty times younger than he.

Cuckoo had not her father's gift of being curious about the affairs of everybody she met, but she had known these people since her childhood, and she was more interested in them than Aunt Effie would have expected.

"Tell me about the Vicar," she asked at length. "How has he turned out?"

"We don't like him. He despises us all as dull, and naturally he isn't popular. Besides he is very stand-offish with the poor people; he refused to go out at night to see Kate Skelton, when she was dying, because he had a cold. A cold indeed!" finished Miss Effie, with a sniff of wrath.

Cuckoo laughed softly. "I knew," she said, "he was going to be a failure."

"How could you tell?"

"Aunt Flora knew."

"My dear Cuckoo—your Aunt Flora is the best woman in the world, but she has as much judgment about people as a cat has about pockets."

Cuckoo said nothing, but smiled to herself. "My father," she went on presently, "once told me that Aunt Flora was a very wise woman."

Miss Effie sat forward suddenly. "Did he?" she asked indignantly, "then he had no business to say it, for he knew perfectly well it wasn't true. *I* have heard him say as much."

"From all I can gather about my father, he must have been a man of chameleon viewpoints. I'm afraid if he were alive now I shouldn't put much trust in his word."

Miss Effie's grim face saddened. "Never say that to your Aunt Flora, my dear," she said.

It was very pleasant rolling along in the comfortable carriage behind the strong, well-matched horses, and

Cuckoo, leaning back, consciously exercised to the full her sense of enjoyment. It had become a habit with her of late to compare her present with her past, and she thought how much more comfortable, how much happier she was now than she had been three years ago, bumbling along the King's Road in a crowded, bad-smelling bus. After a while her thoughts came back to her companion.

"Aunt Effie," she said, "I believe you have always thought that Aunt Flora cared for my poor father?"

Miss Effie frowned fiercely. "I have never said such a thing," she declared; "you've no right to say that I have."

"I didn't say you said it. I was only saying that I thought you thought it."

"Did you! Of course, you being at the time of your father's death nine years old, your opinion most naturally would be of greater weight than mine," returned her aunt. "However, neither you nor I have any right to pry into my sister's secrets——"

"I don't mean to pry," Cuckoo said gently.

Her aunt had noticed that, however reserved and haughty her manner was to other people since her return to London six months before, she was to her aunts more gentle, more deferential, than she had ever been. Miss Effie relented.

"I'm sure you didn't mean to," she returned, "and I've always been grieved and sorry for many things about your father, but I will say one thing for him: whatever his faults might have been, if Flora ever did care for him, it was by no wish of his, and I am sure he never knew."

"You both knew Peregrine, too, when he was young, didn't you?" Cuckoo asked.

"Oh, yes," Miss Effie answered briskly; "when he was quite young, just after his mother's death, he often came to Tarring-Peverell, and that was before the railway was

built to Redcastle, so he came by way of Middleton and used to stop the night at the 'Grouse.' We often saw him; he was very fond of our mother. Ah, my dear, he was a beautiful young man. I've traveled, you know, but even in Paris I never saw anyone so splendid."

At this odd confusion of ideas Cuckoo did not smile; Aunt Effie's innocent boasting rather touched her nowadays.

"I remember once," Miss Effie went on, "we went to a ball at Middleton. Dear mama took us. And Pelly was there with some young officers, and he danced half the night with Flora. She was very pretty, and she had a beautiful frock—pale green, with little flounces all the way up, and a little tucker threaded with black velvet ribbon."

Miss Effie gave a deep sigh. She had never enjoyed herself at the few balls to which she had been, but she remembered Miss Flora's triumph with simple pride.

Suddenly Cuckoo laid her hand on the old woman's.

"Listen, Aunt Effie," she said. "I want to tell you something I have never said before, and I shall never say it again, but I don't want you to forget: I *was* sorry when you and Aunt Flora were hurt by what I did, and I was grateful when you forgave me——"

Miss Effie stared at her in amazement. It was the first time in her life that she had ever heard Cuckoo make an apology, and, what was more, Cuckoo's small, fathomless eyes were wet as she spoke.

"There, there," the old lady answered. "Thank you, my dear; I'm glad you said that. It was a shock to us, of course. We were so sorry for poor—I mean—I mean to say——"

"You mean to say you were sorry for George?" Cuckoo interrupted. "Then I'll tell you something else. George

and I were dreadfully unhappy, Aunt Effie. It was all a mistake; we never suited each other at all."

"But you were so happy that first summer at Roseroofs," protested the old woman, bewildered as to whether she should feel glad or sorry. "Don't you remember?"

"I do remember," Cuckoo said in a hard voice, "but it didn't last. I suppose it was just that neither of us was fine enough to put up with all the horrid little things that poor people have to put up with."

"Perhaps it was only that you were too young," Miss Effie suggested. "George was a dear, good boy; as sweet-tempered a boy as I ever knew. Perhaps if you had tried a little more, Cuckoo——" She broke off suddenly. "But goodness gracious me, what am I saying? Dear Peregrine is so good and so fond of you, and you are so happy! By the way, Cuckoo, did you know George was ill?"

"No."

"Yes. Flora had a letter yesterday from old Mary at Clavers. He's had pneumonia and been very bad."

"I'm sorry. Aunt Effie, have you ever seen him—since?"

Miss Effie shook her head. "No, he's not been back to the Dale. It's all very dreadful, my dear, and I can't think it right. I do hope he's happy."

"So do I," Cuckoo said. "Poor George! It was my fault as well as his."

Miss Effie suggested cheerfully that George might marry, and Cuckoo agreed that such a *dénouement* would be very desirable.

That evening most of the men played billiards, so that in the drawing-room after dinner there sat only six or seven people; the two Janeways, Lady Pelter, Mantepop, who had turned up from Paris full of news of that delightful city, the Greek-looking youth, whose name was Adrian

Taylor, and who was never very far away from Cuckoo, and the two Misses Plues. Taylor was playing the piano; he played with charm, though in a scrappy, unsatisfying way, and the others sat near the fire, as it was a chilly evening, listening to him. Janeways, sitting in his usual chair, a kind of throne of crimson brocade, with heavily-carved, gilded legs and arms, was reading, as usual with him in the evening. The light from the shaded lamp fell on his head, and his serene, kind, high-bred face might almost have been the face of a priest; a priest of some austere and noble religion. There was in it no sign of the stormy and diversified life he had led; there was no selfishness in it, and not a hint of coarseness.

Diamantopoulos, who was talking to Lady Pelter, studied him for a while.

"Wonderful, Janeways, is he not?" the little old Greek gentleman asked. Lady Pelter understood at once.

"Amazing," she said. "He is well named the Magnificent. There he sits as deep in his book as if we were all dead and stuffed, instead of fidgeting about as we all do fidget, we moderns——"

Mantepop nodded.

"Yes, that's just it—we moderns. He is not a modern. He's a man of the Mediaevo. He ought to have a Court, like one of the old dukes in Italy. Have you ever," he asked meditatively, "seen him in a temper?"

Lady Pelter shook her head with a mock shudder. "No, and I don't want to, thank you."

"I have, but I won't tell you about it. He has changed a little," his friend went on. "I can't exactly describe the change, but it is there. I hadn't seen him since—since the marriage. We met in Hawaii——"

Lady Pelter lowered her voice as Taylor ceased playing.

"They were married in Tokio, you know. He's a very wise man; it was clever of him to go on traveling for

another year after the marriage. They camped out in Morocco, the spring and part of the summer before they came back. She is a lucky woman, is Nicky."

The little Greek looked meditatively to where Cuckoo sat with her aunts, young Taylor on a stool a little way off, gazing at her.

"It's a pity," he said abruptly, "that there is not a child."

"Yes, I was saying so only the other day to the old ladies."

"However, there's plenty of time, though he is sixty-four, and so far as I know never had any children at all. *Espérons le bien!* Shall I show you some card tricks?"

The little man had a positive genius for this innocent kind of entertainment, but Lady Pelter shook her head.

"No. I want him to show us the Bag of Saffron. There seems to be some mystery about it."

She turned in her seat and called to her host.

"Peregrine."

Instantly he put down his book and came towards her.

"Yes, my dear Blanche." Young Taylor looked at him, unwilling admiration in his handsome face.

"By Jove!" he muttered.

Cuckoo smiled. "Yes, isn't he?" she said.

"Peregrine, don't be a bore. Do get the Bag of Saffron and show it to us." Lady Pelter, very pretty indeed in her fluffy black gown, looked up with a childish grimace of entreaty.

"I have told you," he said gravely, "that the thing isn't worth looking at."

"And I have said that I have seen it and think it is. Nicky, make him show it to us."

Cuckoo laughed. "Dear Lady Pelter," she murmured, "how could I make him?"

Sir Peregrine looked from his wife to the speaker and back. Then he said slowly:

"Very well, Blanche, if you insist, I'll go and get the thing, but remember, I'll not let it out of my own hands."

He left the room and there was a momentary silence.

"What is the thing? Tell me about it?" Taylor pleaded, moving nearer to Cuckoo.

Lady Pelter answered. "It's a very, very old jewel that is supposed to bring luck, or health, or something, to the woman who wears it. It's hideous, I know that much, and it hangs on a gloriously beautiful diamond chain, so if I were you, Nicky, I'd wear it."

Cuckoo hid a little yawn.

"I've only seen it, as I said the other day at lunch, once years ago, by chance, in a jeweller's shop. My husband has never shown it to me and he never talks about it. Did you not see," she added to Lady Pelter, "that he didn't wish to get it now?"

Lady Pelter shrugged her shoulders. "He was very tiresome about it," she pouted in what Rachel called "mother's maddening, spoilt-baby way," "so I made up my mind I'd make him."

Janeways came in a few minutes later, with a little brass chest in his hand. Then he set it on the table by the group of people that drew near him. "I warn you," he said, "you are all going to be disappointed." He opened the box by touching some spring and took from it a bag of worn, dark blue velvet brocade.

"There," he said, "this is the Bag of Saffron."

He held the chain over his two hands, the magnificent diamonds flashing in the light, the little shabby pendant looking curiously inadequate as it swayed to and fro.

Cuckoo alone had not moved. She sat, her face politely turned towards them, but without a ray of interest in it. No one offered to take the jewel from its owner's hands

and after a moment he put it back into its bag and closed the lid of the box on it.

"Was it worth while?" he asked.

Mantepop had drawn back a little and was watching Cuckoo, who now stared absently into the fire. Now he went up to her.

"Don't you care for diamonds, Lady Janeways?"

She started. "I love jewels of all kinds, and I suppose I love diamonds and rubies best, because they are the most valuable," she said quietly.

The little man was very much interested, very curious, but dared say no more.

That evening, much later, Lady Janeways knocked at the door of her husband's dressing-room

"May I come in, Pelly?" she asked.

"Come in, my dear." He rose and put a chair for her by the fire.

She was in her dressing-gown, but she had not touched her hair and she still wore her little high-heeled satin shoes.

"I've come to ask you something," she said.

"I hope you know, my dear, that anything I can do for you, I do with the greatest pleasure."

Suddenly she knelt down on the hearth-rug, and turning, put both hands on his knee.

"Pelly," she said, "I want the Bag of Saffron."

His face changed a little, but he laid his hand on hers.

"You want a diamond chain, my dear?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, it isn't only the chain. I want the Bag of Saffron itself. Do you remember that day when you told me the story about it? Sitting outside the little church by the convent, in Paris?"

"I remember everything," he said, sadly, but with a little smile.

"Well, why haven't you given it to me?"

Looking over her head into the fire, he was silent for what seemed a long time. Finally she interrupted his silence.

"I remember what you told me. You've never given it to anyone, and only that nun was good enough. Peregrine, is it," she asked, rising to her knees and looking straight into his eyes, "because you think I'm not good?"

"If I didn't think you good, you would not be my wife, Nicoleta," he answered, with the sternness that lay somehow so near always to his gentle kindness.

"I could see Aunt Flora thinking to-night that that was why, because—because of George—what I did to him. Was it that?"

He rose. "My dear, no. I know you to be an absolutely virtuous woman. I would stake my soul on your never having had so much as your hand kissed by any man but Loxley and myself. But I can't give you the Bag of Saffron."

"But *why?*" she persisted. "Why? It's yours and you could if you wanted to. These people know the story; everybody knows the story, and if I don't wear it this Season in town what will people think?"

"People must think as, *du reste*, they always do," he returned quietly; "what they like. I can't explain my feeling to you—it's in my blood. If there is any other jewel that you would like to have, that is within my means, I will get it for you. Thank God, I am a very rich man."

Cuckoo did not answer and he went on:

"Would you like another string of pearls?"

She was frowning, angry and hurt, but at these words her face gradually lightened.

"Yes," she said, her voice breaking a little, "I should like some pearls, and I want a ruby, a big, uncut one, like a little pear, to wear round my neck."

Janeways' brows contracted for a second, but not in anger.

"You shall have them," he said, "and soon. Now, good-night, my dear. You look tired."

He kissed her forehead and opened the door, holding it open until he had heard her door close.

Then he went back and again sat down by the fire.

CHAPTER XXX

"WHERE are you going, Nicky?"

"I'm going on the lake."

Rachel looked at her thoughtfully.

"Not with Adrian?"

"With Adrian."

The two girls sat on the broad stone balustrade of the peacock terrace one morning two or three days later. Cuckoo was in white, and wore a funny, cone-shaped hat of iridescent green and blue. It had pleased her of late to wear peacock colors, and with her look of abounding health and strength, the colors did not quench her little face. Rachel wore blue and looked, beside her friend, a little dowdy.

"You'll have trouble with him," Rachel went on, after a moment. "I've been watching."

"It must have been dull," Cuckoo returned indifferently.

"It wasn't dull; and what is more, your Aunt Effie has noticed him, too."

"It's a pity it wasn't Aunt Flora. Poor dear aunts," Cuckoo laughed. "It really hurts them to think of me as a daughter of Belial, but they can't help it, poor things. Peregrine says that Aunt Flora was as pretty as a picture when he was a young man. How dreadful old age is," she added dreamily.

Rachel was silent for a moment and then, visibly taking her courage in her hands, she went on.

"Look here, Nicky, I'm going to tell you something, and you mustn't be angry, because it's only because she's fond of you."

"What's because who's fond of me?" Cuckoo's voice had changed.

"It's mamma. She's afraid Peregrine will notice about Adrian Taylor." Rachel drew back, almost as if in fear, as Cuckoo turned round and looked her in the face.

"Say exactly what you mean, please, Rachel. What is there in Adrian Taylor that it could possibly concern my husband to notice?"

Rachel's worn, rather fretful face flushed. "You needn't put on your great airs with me, Nicky. You don't frighten me and it's silly. Everyone can see that he's crazy about you, even Yvette said something about it the other day—somebody was looking for you, and Yvette said she had just seen Mr. Taylor go to the rose-garden, so that you would probably be there."

"The poor young man is a poet; his manners overleap his feelings. Ah, here he comes."

She rose, but Rachel went on hurriedly, laying her hand on Cuckoo's sleeve.

"Look here, Cuckoo, do be careful. Mamma says everything's gone so splendidly for you, it would be too awful if you made a mistake now and spoilt it all."

Taylor had come up the steps of the terrace and was approaching them slowly in order not to disturb the peacocks, who were having a small durbar of their own. Cuckoo looked at him.

"I shall go," she said in an even voice, "wherever I like with Adrian Taylor, or with anyone else, and whenever I like. What I do is nobody's business but my own."

Rachel could not help being impressed by her manner, but for all that she went on doggedly.

"Mamma has known Pelly Janeways since before you were born," she persisted, "and she says that he can be perfectly dreadful if he's angry. Cuckoo, *do* be careful. If you are really fond of Adrian——"

The marble under Lady Janeways' feet received a sharp smack from one of her small brown shoes.

"Heavens and earth, Rachel, you make me sick! Do you suppose I don't know about Captain Gascoyne? I ran away and left my husband for another man. You have not left your husband, and you've *not* run away with the other man, therefore you think yourself a model wife and dare to suspect me of being a sneak and a beast. Hallo, Adrian," she cried, "I'm ready," adding in an undertone to the terrified Rachel, "You are quite right. I *am* a beast, but I'm a beast in my own way—and my way isn't your way."

She joined young Taylor, who was looking extremely handsome in his white flannels, and the two strolled away over the beautifully kept lawn, down the marble steps so like the steps in a fairy story, and disappeared in the belt of trees that hid from the terrace all but a glimmering streak of the lake, whither they were bound.

Rachel Jackson was angry, but hers was not the anger of righteousness and soon died away, for there was in it a disintegrating element of vanity. She was proud of her inconsiderable conquest of Captain Gascoyne and could not help being glad that Cuckoo had noticed it; so in a few moments her anger had evaporated, and she went upstairs to have her first look that day at the children. It was only ten o'clock, for amongst Cuckoo's good points was the one of early rising, and the two girls and one or two stray guests had had their breakfast an hour ago. But as she passed the breakfast-room window, Rachel saw that several of the little breakfast-tables were occupied.

After she had disappeared, Miss Flora and Miss Effie finished their breakfast and went out together on the west terrace, where, at the south end, there was a shady oasis of chairs and tables.

"Have you seen Nicoleta this morning?" Miss Flora asked, for Miss Effie had been down before her.

"Yes, Flora. She sat with me at breakfast until some of the others came down. She doesn't seem to have a real place. I suppose it *is* very delightful, this way of little tables, but I shall always think that there ought to be a tea and coffee service and the hostess sitting pouring out——"

"Of course, when there are so many people in the house," Miss Flora replied in timid defence of the new customs, which she liked no better than did her sister, "it would make her very tired pouring out for them, particularly if they all took two cups. And the little separate tea and coffee services are very pretty, Effie. But where did you say Cuck—Nicoleta went?"

"She's gone off somewhere with the long-legged poet." The scorn in Miss Effie's voice was most audible.

"I wonder," Miss Flora mused, "whether Peregrine likes Mr. Taylor? Sometimes I have thought he doesn't."

"He says he's very gifted."

"Oh, Effie, so was Lord Byron gifted."

It was a curious chance that Miss Flora and Janeways should have been together at the foot of the terrace a few hours later, when young Taylor came tearing through the wood, bearing in his arms an unconscious and dripping Cuckoo.

She had slipped in getting out of the boat, he explained; and Janeways, after feeling his wife's pulse, took her from the young man and carried her to the house without a word.

Half an hour later Cuckoo had come to and was better. and Aunt Flora sat by her bed, hearing her story.

They had rowed to the far side of the lake, walked up over the moors, and taken the boat back, and then somehow the boat overturned and she could remember no more.

"You must have stepped on the edge of the boat, Cuckoo," Miss Flora murmured, stroking her hand softly.

Cuckoo stared. "How could I have stepped on the edge," she said, "when I was sitting in the middle?"

Janeways, who stood by the window, his hands behind his back, turned at this.

"Come, Flora," he said, "you and I had better go down now, and perhaps she'll go to sleep."

He paused for a moment at the foot of the bed, looking at his wife, his dark eyes full of an expression that poor Miss Flora could not understand but which vaguely alarmed her, and as he and she went down the broad stairs together they met Taylor coming up. The young man's face, as he had emerged from the little wood, had made an unforgettable impression on Miss Flora, and even now, when he had had time to recover and change his clothes, he looked unnecessarily, and too conspicuously, shaken.

Janeways looked at him, his position on the stairs giving him the advantage of a couple of feet.

"How did it happen?" he asked gravely.

"She was getting out and lost her balance and—must have stepped on the edge of the boat——" He broke off, his eyes wavering. Janeways stood very erect, looking at him.

"That is the explanation Miss Plues just suggested to my wife herself," he said, measuredly. "It isn't a good explanation, Taylor."

"I—I——"

"Don't do it again," Janeways went on. Then, leaning forward a little, he said, very quietly, "I am sorry I can't ask you to stay in my house any longer. The car will be at the door in half an hour's time, and you can easily catch the two-fifteen train from Redcastle." After a second he added politely, "Good-bye," and walked slowly

downstairs. He crossed the great hall and went out on the terrace, then, after a moment, without paying any attention to Miss Flora, whom he seemed to have forgotten, went down the steps and on and on, till he reached a path leading between eight-foot yew hedges on to the left. Down this path he disappeared.

Miss Flora, who was trembling from head to foot, whose hands shook so that, to get them out of her sight, she folded them away under her arms, stood for a moment in the door, and then with a resolute air that sat oddly on her tenuous, tremulous old frame, followed him.

She had never been a morally brave woman and she was very frightened at her undertaking, but she walked quickly on, her head high. It had rained the night before and the smell of freshly-clipped yew, pungent and suggestive of romance, filled the air. At the far end of the green alley there was a path leading up to the high moor and there she knew she would find Janeways. She had known the man almost all her life, but she had never known him well; he, as a young man, had had for her and her sister the kind of careless, uninterested affection that young men living in a great world do have for quiet, old-fashioned women in the country.

His wild doings, the tales of which had reached Roseroofs off and on throughout many years, had frightened and hurt Miss Flora, though she had never spoken of them. But the greatest hurt of all had been when he had shown so little respect for her mother's memory and for her own and her sister's friendship, as to bring shame and grief to the little house that had never held for him anything but hospitality. There was no one in the world by running away with whom Cuckoo could have brought so much sorrow to her aunts, as Peregrine Janeways, and Miss Flora had lain awake many a night grieving as much for the fact that it was he, as for the

fact that Cuckoo had broken her vows and brought shame and ruin to her husband.

But now the old lady believed Janeways to be in trouble, so down the long path she went and out from the green shadow into the broad sunlight, up the narrow, winding way to the moor, and there she found him seated on the edge of an abrupt precipitous fall to the dale, much as he might have sat on a headland by the sea.

He rose when he saw her and threw away his cigar.

"My dear Miss Flora!" he exclaimed, surprised. "I hope nothing has happened? She isn't worse?"

Miss Flora stood, one hand to her heart, which was beating very hard. "You forget," she said, "I left her when you did. No, I wanted to speak to you about—things."

He bowed courteously, his white hair shining in the sun.

"Shall we walk on a little further? There's a bench a little way on."

They sat down on the bench, and Miss Flora, with the desperate courage of shy people, burst out suddenly into the depths of things.

"It's about Cuckoo, and that young man." Janeways looked at her.

"What young man?"

"The one you sent away—Mr. Taylor."

"Oh, Taylor, yes, yes. I forgot you were there," he returned, obviously sincere. "What about him?"

Miss Flora clasped her hands to still their tremble.

"I'm glad you sent him away," she said. "I didn't like him; neither did Effie."

Janeways smiled a little.

"Dear Flora," he said, his voice very gentle, "I'm sorry you were there on the stairs. I'm afraid you misunderstood."

"I didn't misunderstand. We are old-fashioned people and know nothing of modern ways, but some things are the same everywhere, and even when one is old one does not forget how to recognize them."

"Yes?" He looked at her, a very kind smile in his dark eye.

"It is flirting," she said. "He has been flirting with Cuckoo, and that is why you sent him away. But I'm sure," she hurried on, "I'm perfectly sure, Peregrine, that —that it wasn't Cuckoo's fault."

Janeways laid one hand on hers. "I am very glad this has happened," he said, "that you have come to me. Between us we may arrive at the truth—we two old people —for we are old, you know, Flora——"

She nodded. "Yes," she said simply. "It's a dreadful thing, isn't it?"

He didn't answer this, but went on in response to what she had said before.

"To begin with, you are no more sure than I that Taylor has been doing what can only be expressed by that hideous and most vulgar word, flirting. Nicoleta never flirts. As to the young man, I didn't put him out of my house because he was flirting with my wife or because he made love to her. I put him out of my house because he made love to her against her will, and was therefore a nuisance."

"Oh!" said Miss Flora, with a little gasp. "I was afraid you would be angry with her."

There was a long pause, during which she studied Janeways' strong, keenly-edged profile as he stared out across the dale. This little conversation was one of the events in Miss Flora's long, nearly eventless life. She was shaken with its portent, but it had filled her heart with a queer sensation of youth. It amazed her to think, as she looked at her companion, that there was to-day nothing, abso-

lutely nothing, that she, Flora Angela Plues, would not dare to say to Peregrine Janeways, the Magnificent.

At last he spoke without turning.

"I was angry—a little," he said, "but only as I should be angry with any one who disturbed the atmosphere of my house by unwelcome demonstrations of any kind. What you have seen in me and mistaken for anger, Flora, is worse than anger—it is, my dear friend, trouble. Trouble," he repeated.

"I knew there was something, Pelly." It was five-and-forty years since she had called him Pelly, but they neither of them noticed the transition.

"Yes," he said, "I have deeply, irrevocably wronged your niece."

"But Lady Pelter said——"

He laughed compassionately and looked at her.

"I shall have to explain to you, I see. Lady Pelter, of course, has said that the world is going to forgive Nicoleta for running away from her husband and for marrying me. That was not what I meant. That kind of forgiveness is worth nothing."

Even now poor Miss Flora did not understand, and her chin quivered as she asked him in a hushed voice:

"Do you mean religion?"

He laughed again, still in the gentle way peculiar to him, that never hurt anybody.

"No; I don't mean religion—or perhaps I do. Shall I try to tell you? I don't think I've ever tried to tell anybody, but I shouldn't mind you."

The flush that at these words rose in Miss Flora's face was so bright, so beautiful, that something stirred in his chest and burned in his eyes at the sight of it. Just so had she flushed nearly half a century before when he had talked to her. She said nothing, and he began.

"Have you ever wondered," he asked, "how I could so hurt you and your sister as to do what I did?"

Miss Flora bent over her hands. "Yes," she said, "I have wondered."

"Then I will tell you, and that will perhaps help you to understand what I mean by saying that I've hurt Nicoleta. Flora, I didn't know until after our marriage, that she was Bob Blundell's daughter."

"You didn't know!"

"No. I never saw her name written, and assumed that it was Locksley. She never mentioned her family; she said very little about her husband, and it was two or three days after our wedding that I happened to ask her her father's name. This seems incredible, but it's perfectly true. You see, we had been traveling all the time of the divorce. I was very happy in making her happy; she's a born traveler, a born sight-seer, of the best kind. She was never tired, and the world was full of things that I wanted her to see. I was," he added slowly, "deeply in love with her. I was also bent on putting out of my mind a fact that I had only recently discovered—the fact that, in spite of my health, my muscular strength, and what I suppose is my irresistible love of life, I was really, by God's will, an old man. So thus it happened that for over a year I didn't know who she was."

"Did she—did she never mention us?" asked poor Miss Flora.

"Often; but only as 'my two aunts.' I asked her who her father had been, and when she told me, I think it was the greatest shock I had ever had in my life. I was very, very sorry, Flora."

Miss Flora sighed deeply.

"Even if you had known, dear Peregrine," she said, "you couldn't have helped—falling in love with her."

"Yes, ah, yes, I could. If I had known in Paris I should

never have seen her again. Her father, though he was in a way a friend of mine, didn't so much matter. But I loved your mother, when I was a little chap, and I've always regarded Effie and you as among my few real friends."

"I'm glad," said Miss Flora softly.

"Besides," he went on in a musing voice, speaking as much to himself as to her, "I didn't, as you say, fall in love with Nicoleta; I walked in deliberately, waded out to my armpits and then plunged; and the wrong that I have done her——"

"And poor George,"—suggested Miss Flora.

Janeways rose and walked up and down, his arms folded, his head bent.

"George, or someone else. Nicoleta," he said, "isn't really alive yet. She has none of the faults and none of the virtues of her age. She never loved me, to do her justice she never said she did. She didn't run away *to* me, she ran away *from* poverty and poor Loxley."

"That makes it worse," said Miss Flora unexpectedly. "We always thought she loved you."

"You don't think so now, do you?" he asked with a whimsical smile, devoid of all bitterness or hurt vanity.

"No," she said, "and I'm sorry. You must never tell Effie this, you know: Effie is the clever one of the family and she doesn't know, and it would shock her to have me know; but there has always been something dreadful about Cuckoo, and I first learned it when she was a little child. I love her and I am sorry for her, but I think it my duty to tell you that I do not believe you to have wronged her as you might have wronged, in doing what you did, a different kind of girl——"

"Dear Flora, don't say any more, I understand. So you've known all these years what I have known only a few months."

Miss Flora's face was very white and drawn.

"Oh, Peregrine," she said, "it has always been dreadful to me. I've never been able to help seeing things, though everybody always thought I didn't see anything, and it makes me feel so guilty towards Effie." She wrung her hands gently, and her eyes were full of tears. After a moment's hesitation she went on, "At the time that everyone was saying how wicked it was of you to run away with her and that she was so young, I always felt, although it seemed ridiculous, that you were more to be pitied than she. It seemed to me that, in a way, you were the young and innocent one. And now you are unhappy. Oh, Peregrine, I do wish you didn't love her so much."

He sat down and put his arms round her bent, hard shoulders.

"Dear Flora," he murmured, "don't be troubled about me. You spoke just like your mother then. Ah, I remember her so well! As to poor little Nicoleta, the fault isn't hers, and about my love, well, it was a thing of vanity and selfishness. I deliberately encouraged it to prove to myself that I was still young. The thing that troubles me now is not myself, but the fact that I have taken from a human creature her right to develop and grow on natural lines. It's as if I had bent a rose-tree and fastened it down to the earth and forced it to grow that way——"

Miss Flora said nothing.

"Nicoleta is only twenty-three now; I am forty years older than she is. I have made her rich and given her the things she thinks she loves best in the world, but I have taken from her the right to love the right things and to live the right way. What ought to be to her the beautiful accomplishment of her youth I have made into a potential sin. I declare to you, Flora," he added, "that I am sincere in saying that I wish I could die now and

leave that poor child free honorably to fulfil her natural destiny."

Miss Flora's eyes were still full of tears—tears that fell slowly down her delicate, faded face. "But you are so good to her," she cried, "so good."

"I'm kind to her," he said, "I'm fond of her. The women I have really loved in my life, and," he added with a whimsical but rather sad little smile, "they have been many, Flora, might have been her grandmothers so far as age goes. I was in love with Nicoleta at first, but I did not love her, and now it would not be true to say that I *love* her as a wife or—anything but a friend, or—a grandfather! I am fond of her, and I believe I am the only person in the world who can see in her the poor little cramped, undeveloped germ of a soul that is all she has. And that," he added quietly, "is my trouble, Flora."

He took out his fine cambric handkerchief and gave it to the old lady, who was vainly struggling to find the pocket that in her smart London frock did not exist.

"Wipe your eyes, my dear," he said. "I wonder if you would have married me if I had asked you forty years ago. You were the right age and perhaps we might have been happy, and then your Cuckoo would have been my niece, too."

He spoke with a whimsical gaiety, smiling down on the weeping Miss Flora.

Suddenly she looked up, having wiped her eyes, which shone as brightly as any girl of twenty's.

"We are so old now, Peregrine Janeways," she said, "that I'm not ashamed to tell you that I'd have married you and thanked God on my knees for you, when I was young."

Sir Peregrine raised her hands and kissed them gallantly.

"My dear, my dear," he said in a voice that main-

tained her feeling of perfect composure. "Would you, indeed? And to think that I never knew it! I should like," he added, "to have had you wear the Bag of Saffron."

Then he gave her his arm and they walked slowly back to the house.

Perhaps that was the happiest day of Miss Flora's life.

CHAPTER XXXI

LATE one afternoon, a few days later, Cuckoo and Rachel were sitting in a boat in the middle of the little lake; the sky was gray, but there was no menace of rain, and the oppressive air seemed less heavy here than anywhere else.

Cuckoo had rowed to the middle of the lake and anchored the boat, and on the middle seat stood the contents of a small tea-basket.

The two girls were lying on cushions very comfortably, their hats off, their tea-cups waiting for the water to boil. For a long time Rachel, who, as she grew older, was developing the pleasant indolence of her mother, lay quiet, her head on her hand, watching the blue flame under the kettle that stood on the middle seat, without speaking. Cuckoo, who had never been lazy, had divided the bread and butter and the little cakes on two of the enamel plates and arranged everything for the tea-making. It was so still that the blue flame under the shining kettle was as motionless as if carved out of a bit of stone, and the dwarf birches that grew round the north end of the small lake were reflected in water so quiet that it was impossible to see where the reflection began and where the real leaves stopped.

Every now and then Cuckoo looked at her friend, half expectantly, but it was some time before Rachel spoke. Then she burst out suddenly, looking fixedly at the bottom of the boat:

"Cuckoo, will you lend me two hundred pounds?"

Cuckoo burst out laughing. "Is that all? And here

was I expecting you to tell me that you had slain the twins and buried them somewhere in the rose-garden! Of course I will, you goose; that is, I'll ask Peregrine."

Rachel sat up and clasped her knees.

"Oh, no. You mustn't tell anyone. If Alison were to hear of it I don't know what he'd do to me."

The kettle was boiling, and Cuckoo, before answering, took it off and quenched the little flame.

"Debts?" she asked concisely.

Rachel nodded. "Yes."

"Bridge or clothes?"

"Forty pounds for Bridge—I won at first, you know; I made quite a lot last summer; and the rest, clothes for me and the children; and then I bought some shares in a silver mine in Arizona that Freddie Welbeck told me about. He lost hundreds, poor dear, and I about seventy pounds. Wasn't it disgusting?"

Very deftly and quickly Cuckoo made the tea. Then she sat back and looked at Rachel.

"Poor old Ray, but where are the clothes?" she asked.

Rachel blushed, her face, which had kept its early promise of heaviness and was too thick about the jaw and throat, a little sulky.

"Oh, they weren't much, anyhow—only a couple of smart frocks I had for the Billington-Sykes' house-party last August."

Cuckoo poured out the tea.

"You don't take sugar, do you? I see. Lady Pelter and Alison weren't at the Sykes', and Captain Gascoyne was. H'm!"

"Oh, Nicky, don't be nasty to me. If you had the slightest idea how dull and disgusting my life is, you wouldn't grudge me a little pleasure once in a while."

"I don't grudge you pleasure; and I think I do know

how dull life can be, my dear. Nobody in this world was ever more bored than I."

"Of course you were, darling. I'm quite sure George was worse even than Alison. Poor Alison at least works."

"George worked, too," flashed out Cuckoo angrily, "he worked like a black, and don't you say he didn't. And if I was bored then, Lord knows, I'm bored enough now."

"Nicky!"

There was a little pause, and Cuckoo drained her cup of boiling tea, which was so hot that it brought tears to her eyes.

"Oh, well, of course I didn't mean that, and I know it sounds ridiculous for me to express moral sentiments of any kind, but I do wish, Rachel, you'd drop that disgusting Billy Gascoyne. However, it's only a matter of time, so I needn't lose my temper; he'll be dropping you before long."

Rachel looked sulky. "You're a cat this afternoon. However, there's no harm in Billy; he's a dear thing and I'm not a bit in love with him, if that's what you mean."

"That *is* what I mean—one of the things. If you were I shouldn't mind half so much, but pretending—working oneself up to emotion, playing games with one's own feelings—I think it's perfectly loathsome. However, you must let me ask Peregrine for the money; he'll lend it you like a shot and never tell a soul. He'll forget all about it in a day or two——"

"Thanks very much," Rachel said slowly, "but couldn't you possibly let me have it without telling him, Nicky?"

"No." Cuckoo's voice was very gruff and harsh. "I haven't a penny of my own. Whenever I want money he gives it to me, no matter how much, but I have no

allowance, and he made me promise him once never to lend a penny to anyone without telling him."

"Oh. All right," Rachel went on reluctantly, "if I don't pay that brute of a woman, she'll summon me, and I must pay Billy——"

"Rachel!" barked Cuckoo, her eyebrows meeting in her old hideous frown. "You don't mean to say you've done that! Borrowing money of a man you are having a love-affair with. My God!"

Rachel began to cry. Cuckoo put the tea-cups away hastily. "It's perfectly disgraceful of you," she said. "I don't wonder you're afraid to have Alison know. I believe Peregrine would kill me if I did such a thing."

"Oh, *would* he?" Rachel snapped. "*I* didn't run away from my husband, and make a disgusting scandal, and be in all the papers, anyhow."

Cuckoo closed the lid of the tea-basket very softly and put it in the bottom of the boat. Then she rose, seated herself, and took the oars in her hands.

"I think, as your hostess," she said, "that this picnic has lasted long enough."

In unbroken silence she pulled back to the little boat-house, and when she had fastened the boat, stepped out with the tea-basket and held out her hand.

"Be careful," she said, "the boat is very unsteady. Are you going back to the house, Rachel? I'm not coming just yet."

Rachel stood and watched her as she went off to the left, towards the greenhouses, light-footed and trim in her well-cut coat and skirt.

Before dinner Cuckoo asked her husband for two hundred pounds to lend Rachel.

"I hope Rachel hasn't been playing cards," Janeways said gravely, as he stood in front of the library fire.

Cuckoo didn't answer.

"May I have it?" she repeated.

"Yes, my dear. Rachel is your friend and I like to have you help her, but for her sake and poor Jackson's you must make her understand that it had better not occur again."

He sat down at the writing-table and, unlocking a drawer, took out a check-book. It was not the great library with the famous collection of books, but a smaller room, which, though lined with books, partook more of the nature of a study or a smoking-room than of a retreat for book-lovers.

"Why do you call Alison 'poor Jackson,' Peregrine?"

Janeways signed his name carefully, blotted the check and glanced up at her before filling in the counterfoil.

"Because I'm sorry for him, aren't you?"

"I don't know, I'm sorry for Rachel, most certainly, but I hadn't thought of Alison."

Janeways rose and handed the check to her.

"There, my dear. So you are more sorry for Rachel?"

"Thanks, Peregrine. Yes, I am, it's dreadful for her to be so poor."

"Sometimes I wonder," he said, looking down at her in the grave, thoughtful way that she had noticed seemed to grow with him, "whether it's right that everything should be judged by the standard of money."

"I thought," she returned indifferently, "that it was generally conceded that that standard is undoubtedly bad; bad," she added with a little laugh, "but universal, like drink."

He did not laugh and the intentness of his gaze embarrassed her.

"Thanks so much for this," she said hurriedly. "I'll go and give it to her."

She left the room, and he stood for a while just where

she had left him, his fine old face heavy with thought. Very little had been said between them about the question of Adrian Taylor. Janeways was a man who asked very few questions, and Cuckoo was a woman who gave very little unsolicited information. A few hours after the young man's departure, Janeways had gone to his wife's room and told her briefly that Taylor had gone.

"You sent him?" she asked, her little face looking very small and white amid her loosened hair as she lay back on her pillows.

"Yes, he was a nuisance, wasn't he?"

"He was, Peregrine."

"Is it true," he said, "that you slipped getting out of the boat?"

Cuckoo closed her eyes, arching her eyebrows in faint disgust at the memory of the incident.

"No," she returned; "is that what he said?"

"Yes, that's why I sent him away."

That was all, but as she went up to Rachel's room with the check, Cuckoo recalled the little scene. Some dim idea about her husband was beginning to stir at the back of her mind, but she didn't look into it closely, for she was training herself, half unconsciously, half deliberately, in self-defence, to avoid even mentally anything that might disturb her.

"Here's the money, Rachel," she said, going into her friend's room.

Lady Rachel was sitting at her glass, putting the finishing touches to her hair. Cuckoo laid the check on the table and there was a short silence, which she herself broke with a little laugh.

"You owe me an apology," she said. "You were abominably rude; but I hate apologies, so don't make one. To get even with you, I'll tell you that the tops of your arms are entirely too fat. You must exercise more, Ray."

"I can't exercise," Rachel returned fretfully, "only the rich can afford exercise. I am much obliged for the money, Nicky, and I'll pay it back as soon as I can, little by little."

"I shouldn't if I were you," Cuckoo answered carelessly. "I don't think Peregrine would like you to." She looked round the room as she spoke, and the discontent that had been hanging over her all day gave way to a feeling of satisfaction. Rachel's silver and crystal dressing-table things were scratched and dented; her silk petticoat was of the kind seen hanging in bunches like monstrous grapes, all exactly alike, in big stores; the dressing-gown over the back of her friend's chair looked almost, if not quite, dirty, and the evening frock on the bed had, Cuckoo knew, for the second time undergone the usually depressing process of freshening up. And she, Cuckoo, had everything in the world she had always wanted!

"Do you remember, Ray, the green sunshade you gave me, the first day we met?"

"I don't know; no. What was it?"

And even this small fact of Lady Rachel's having forgotten what to her had been so unimportant and to Cuckoo so remarkably vital, added, without her knowing, to Cuckoo's sudden sense of well-being and self-congratulation. Poor Rachel! Poor, shabby, untidy Rachel, with no beautiful "things."

Cuckoo was very gay that evening, laughing and jesting in a way that pleased Miss Effie and Miss Flora, and after dinner Miss Flora tripped across the room to Janeways in a little flutter of excitement.

"You see, Peregrine," she whispered, flushing her pretty, shell-pink flush, "she's glad that foolish young man has gone. Did you see the smile she gave you as we left the dining-room?"

Janeways' own smile was very kind and pleasant as he looked down at the old lady.

"I am going to give her a ruby," he said, "and she likes rubies."

The next day the house-party began to break up, and on the Monday no one was left except Miss Flora and Miss Effie, and Mantepop, who was going back to London with Janeways.

At the last minute Cuckoo, to everybody's surprise and to the real pleasure of the aunts, had announced her intention of not accompanying her husband and his friend.

"I'm going to Roseroofs for a couple of days, if the aunts will have me," she said at dinner. "I'll join you in town Thursday or Friday."

Janeways face lighted with pleasure.

"Good," he said heartily, "that will be delightful. If you like, take the big car and the luggage can all go on it; Marsh can put it up at the 'Grouse.' If you like you might even go as far as York in it—you and Marthe."

Miss Effie and Miss Flora were very happy over this decision, and the next morning they started off with Cuckoo, Cuckoo's maid sitting in front with the chauffeur.

Janeways had not forgotten his promise about the ruby and the pearls, and as he said good-bye to his wife he promised her that he would have them ready when she arrived in town. She looked up at him with a new look, which he had seen several times of late and about which he had wondered each time, and thanked him.

"You are very good to me, Peregrine," she said, "and——" She broke off.

There was in her, as the car rolled along up over the pass towards Wiskedale, not a vestige of the new Nicoleta of the haughty eyelids and the cold manner she had dis-

played as hostess at her first house-party. She seemed younger, and though not perhaps happier, yet a little more merry, and she was honestly glad to be going back to her old home. The aunts were delighted with her.

It chanced that she was the first to see the windows of Roseroofs shining in the sun as they rounded the shoulder of the hill. She stood up and pointed.

"Look, oh look! There it is, Aunt Flora, there it is, Aunt Effie! Oh, the dear little place!"

Miss Flora made a mental note that she would very soon write Janeways a long letter, encouraging him to hope for beautiful changes in his wife.

As the car passed up the Dale and through Warcop, Cuckoo glanced about her with something of the excitement of a child.

"Oh, there's Joss Skelton; I suppose that's his new wife; heavens! isn't she plain! And there's Sarah Oughtenshaw with a new baby. Oh, how utterly unchanged it all looks!"

"Why shouldn't it look unchanged?" asked Miss Effie austerely; "what do you expect to happen in Warcop in less than three years?"

It was true that Warcop looked as if nothing but the last trump could ever change it; yet Cuckoo felt that she had been away for half a century.

As they crossed the bridge she remembered the very spot where she had slipped and fallen the day she raced down from Thornby Lodge to catch George on his way to the bus. Her face hardened, and she sat silent until the car had reached the gate.

Esther Oughtenshaw, now wearing a thick, fluted white cap, stood at the gate, welcome and delight written all over her face. Greatly to her own surprise, Cuckoo put her arms round the old woman's neck and gave her a sound kiss, then she ran on into the house ahead of her

aunts and into the drawing-room. It, too, had not changed. It looked small and shabby and faded, but, almost to her own annoyance, it looked home to her. Then she went upstairs to the blue room, which was to be hers, and knelt by the window, looking out over the Dale.

When Marthe, Lady Janeways' smart Parisian maid, entered, she found her mistress sitting by the window with a languid air. An English maid under similar circumstances might have tried to curry favor with her lady by expressing wonder as to how that lady would be able to make herself comfortable in such cramped and old-fashioned quarters. But Marthe was a Frenchwoman, so she was ecstatic over the view; she was delighted with the charming room; she even went to the length of admiring Esther Oughtenshaw.

Cuckoo listened languidly, quite seeing through the subtle flattery. But she enjoyed the quiet supper in the old, many-windowed dining-room, and Esther's tea-cakes were praised by her in a way that surprised that shrewd old woman.

"Miss Coocoo's changed," she said to Nellie, who had not married and was still with them.

"Aye, she's not so proud now, for all she's sae rich."

Aunt Effie and Aunt Flora each, separately and without expressing the thought to each other, wondered if she had not possibly been a little hard on Cuckoo at Tarring-Peverell. She was delightfully simple and natural now; in a way more simple and natural than she had ever been before. They did not know, the two old ladies, that achievement often brings with it a simplicity unknown to the striving that went before it.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE next day it rained and the ladies sat indoors. Cuckoo had relapsed somewhat into her Tarring-Peverell manner, but the day passed very pleasantly. She sat for a long time in the kitchen, watching Esther make pastry and listening to the old woman's tales of her own childhood.

"I can see ye now, Miss Coocoo—my lady, I mean to say—sitting there on t' table on t' creepy stool to keep your frock clean the day Miss Marcia came."

"I can remember that day, Esther," Cuckoo answered, leaning her elbows on the table, and cupping her chin in her hands. "But you needn't call me 'my lady,' I like being called 'Miss Coocoo.'"

Esther looked at her shrewdly. "You've changed a good bit," she said slowly.

Cuckoo did not answer, and then she announced briskly that the said changes were due to her old age. "I'm five-and-twenty, you know, Esther—a quarter of a century old!" She looked round the kitchen, in which not a single thing had changed, and then suddenly she remembered Agnes.

"Tell me about Agnes Vosper," she said suddenly. Esther shook her head. "I can't tell you about Agnes Vosper, Miss Coocoo."

"Why not?"

"Because"—the old woman held her dough in one hand while she freshly spread the board with flour—"because," she answered, "there is no Agnes Vosper."

For some reason Cuckoo felt a pang as of guilt at these

words. She remembered Agnes's miserable face on the occasion of her visit to the farm. It was she who had made Agnes marry Vosper, and now—"What do you mean, Esther?"

Esther laughed as she rolled out her pastry. "I mean that she has been married to Chris Greening for over a year. Didn't Miss Flora tell you, Miss Coocoo?"

"Oh, I'm so glad," Cuckoo returned, her face brightening suddenly. "I was so sorry for her the last time I saw her."

Esther looked at her very severely. "You remember whose doing it was?" she asked.

"I do. But all's well that ends well, and they'd have been miserable if they'd married then, Esther."

"No, they wouldn't; they were young and strong and could 'a worked, and t'was a bad life she had with Ike Vosper. Howsoever, she's happy enough now, and she's gotten a little baby. It was born last Sunday, and they're that pleased, the two of 'em! Chris Greening goes about as if he was the only man since Jacob who ever got a child."

Cuckoo did not ask why Jacob was honored with this distinguishing allusion, but the next morning being a fine day, she told her aunts she was going up Cotherside to see Agnes Greening's baby.

When she had gone Miss Effie and Miss Flora looked at each other, something almost like dismay in their faces, but they didn't say anything. Miss Effie thought that poor Cuckoo perhaps was grieving because she had no bairn herself, but Miss Flora, deceitful, fluttering, wise Miss Flora, was desolated and troubled. Her letter to Sir Peregrine would, she felt, be less easy and pleasant to write than she had hoped.

Meantime Cuckoo walked down the hill gaily—briskly; for a long time she had had no really long walk and she

enjoyed the ease and lightness with which her feet carried her. Crossing the Green she met and spoke to several people she had known all her life; she gave pennies to Sarah Oughtenshaw's children and bought a London paper at the little shop where, as a child, she had purchased slate-pencils and bull's-eyes. The very smell of the shop had not changed; it smelt of rubber, and printer's ink, and peppermint, and stuffiness; above all, of stuffiness. The window, she knew, had never been opened, and the constant quick opening and closing of the door had hardly impaired the solidity of the ancient smell that dwelt in the corners. She held her breath, as she had always done, as she made her purchases, and then tore the door open almost frantically.

As she crossed the Green, she saw ahead of her a stout black figure in an absurd hat. It was Mr. Wick, the Methodist minister. She had forgotten Mr. Wick—hadn't thought of him for years, of him, or his flat-nosed wife, or his many children, and here he was, looking exactly as he had looked ever since she could remember.

"Good morning, Mr. Wick," she cried, stopping and holding out her hand.

"Good morning," he said hastily, as he took off his hat.

"Don't you know me?" she asked, laughing, and realizing with a little pang of pleasure how unlikely it was that the leggy, badly-dressed girl of the old days should be recognizable to the good man in the smart young woman of that morning. "I'm Lady Janeways—Cuckoo Blundell from Roseroofs."

Over Mr. Wick's fat face crept a blush and he drew back, looking away from her.

Cuckoo stared at him. Then she realized what it meant. Mr. Wick was not an unkind man, he was not trying to hurt her, he was in fact plainly distressed and embar-

rassed by the situation, but Mr. Wick, the Methodist minister of this remote Yorkshire village, plainly considered Lady Janeways to be a person not fit for him to shake hands with.

"I—I—good morning, madam," he stammered, and with a little sideways duck he doubled back on the way he had come, turning his toes in in the ridiculous manner that even now, in the midst of her amused anger, she remembered always to have been his. She went on down the street to Crowner's Bridge, pausing a moment to look at the pool of olive-green water below the little waterfall, down the footpath that led to the road to Thornby Lodge, her head high, her cheeks lit with little scarlet flames. She was extremely annoyed with Mr. Wick, and her annoyance was slow in dying out. She would have liked, in return for the uncomfortable moment he had caused her, to do him some injury; she hated him. It never occurred to her that he could be in any way right or that she was unjust in her anger. She despised him for despising her.

It was a beautiful, windy, moorland day. The sky was full of huge and cumbrous clouds that shouldered and jostled each other in their haste westward; it was a day good for being alive and for walking.

Christopher Greening's cottage, she knew, was about half a mile beyond Thornby Lodge. He was gamekeeper to the new owner of that estate, and on reaching the lodge Cuckoo passed and looked up at the house, the sunset glitter of whose windows was a part of her memories of Roseroofs. Poor old Judge Capel, she thought, what an awful life his has been—always lonely, always cross, always ill. He had been kind to her in his way, and her thoughts of him in return were kind, as she raced up the road, a little blue figure in one of the close-fitting Mercury hats she affected. She was glad that Agnes was happy at

last; poor Agnes! And in her present mood she congratulated herself on her youthful wisdom in preventing the young servant from marrying her impecunious sweetheart. It had not done Agnes any real harm to wait a few years, and now she and her new husband were comfortably off and happy. She smiled at this pleasant thought, for the memory of poor Agnes Vosper's face as she had last seen it at the gate of Settle Farm had sometimes refused to be banished from her mind.

The cottage, a mere outcrop of the stony soil from which it sprang, was reached by a small path leading from the road, through the heather that encroached on all sides as if about to flow in across the small garden and overgrow it entirely. Two or three bright milk-pans were sweetening in the sun on the flagged place outside the door, and bees boomed in the sweet-williams and stocks and single pinks, from which the sun was drawing a royal smell.

It was all very quiet, the moorland hush hardly disturbed by the existence of the little human habitation in its midst. A rush-bottomed chair stood on the flag-stones, and Cuckoo sat down without knocking and looked about her. A black cat with white paws lay on top of the stone wall and eyed her with grave indifference; in the byre at the far end of the house a calf moved softly; that, and the sound of the bees were the only things that disturbed the old-fashioned, sunny silence. The very hens pecked quietly in the grass, or strutted about, badly balanced on their silly legs in too short pantaloons. Cuckoo wondered why the hen, which is surely, next to the cow, the most valuable of domestic creatures, should be cursed with so idiotic and unprepossessing an appearance.

Presently she heard someone coming, and, pushed by an instinct that she was never able to explain, she rose

and stepped behind a thick clump of lilac that grew on the far side of the door.

Through the leaves she could see Chris Greening's face as he came across the moor to his home. He had been a good-looking youth in rather a silly way, and now he was just as good-looking and just as silly-looking. The expression on his face as he came up the path, almost on tip-toes, was one that Cuckoo had never before seen. He stopped outside the cottage door, sat down in the chair, and unlaced and took off his big, clumsy boots. His coarse, gray woollen socks were, she could see, a perfect mosaic of careful darns. Evidently Agnes took good care of him. Setting the boots, which looked like rhinoceros heads so crumpled and corrugated were they, by the chair, he tip-toed softly into his house. After a moment Cuckoo followed him and stood in the door.

It was a large and roomy cottage; to her right was the kitchen, the door just ajar; to her left, where Chris went in, the door was wide open. It was a small room, as the bedrooms of peasants almost always are, and the bed took up nearly half of it. In the bed, under a narrow canopy of faded chintz, a spotlessly-clean patch-work quilt over her, Cuckoo saw Agnes. She lay with her eyes shut, her baby tucked into the crook of one arm. By her, Chris had knelt down, and was looking at her with the nearest thing to adoration poor Cuckoo Janeways had ever seen in her life. She stood still, afraid to move. Only once had she seen anything even approaching the look that was in the face of this poor, common man, as he knelt by his wife and child, and that was in George's big, dim eyes, the day of the birth of their little girl. George had loved her, she knew, although she now knew what a poor thing her love for George had been, but even he, even on that day, had not achieved this fine rapture. Presently Agnes opened her eyes, and her wan face, look-

ing so much older than it had a right to look, lighted up in splendid response to what she saw in her husband's.

"Is she asleep?" Chris whispered.

"Aye, luv," the woman smiled.

A few minutes later when Greening went into the kitchen to fetch his wife a glass of milk, there was no one in the passage, but something lay on the floor. He took it up and spread it out on his big brown hand in amazement. It was a filmy square of batiste and in the corner was a little monogram.

First Chris Greening looked at it, then he smelt it, then, together with the glass of milk, he took it back to his wife.

"Look what I've found in t'passage, Agnes," he said. "Someone's been in but there's no one there now."

Agnes looked at the handkerchief. "That belongs to our Miss Coocoo, Chris," she said. "I thought I heard something before I opened my eyes——"

Greening wondered why Cuckoo had not made her presence known but Agnes was not surprised.

"Poor Miss Coocoo," she said softly, holding her baby closer. "I know why she didn' coom in——"

CHAPTER XXXIII

IT was only about half-past eleven when Lady Janeways left Chris Greening's cottage. When she reached the road she stood for a moment staring absently before her. She had no wish to go back to Roseroofs; she hated, for some reason, the thought of crossing the Green at Warcop; she would take a long, long walk.

The Aunts would not expect her, for she had told them that she might spend the whole day out of doors, as she had so often done in her girlhood, and in her pocket she had a couple of bars of chocolate, so she would not be hungry. Below, slightly to the left, lay Warcop; a little to her right she could cross the river near Watlass Mill and go up Meldon Side and walk along up dale as far as Clavers. She would walk along the Edge and return home by the Green Bench.

So she went down the hill to the Dale, walked for a couple of miles along the shady highroad, and then, crossing by the Mill, made her way slowly up the slope. The mood she was in was strange to her and a little frightening. It was absurd, she told herself angrily, for her to have a lonely, desolate feeling because Chris Greening had looked at his wife with something in his eyes that had never been in any eyes that looked on her. It was ridiculous that the glory and comfort of her husband's wealth should have seemed to depart from her as she stood in the poor little moorland cottage. She had tried the equivalent of her class for love in a cottage, and a miserable failure it had been. Suppose she had been still living in that awful Whistler Mansions with only one servant,

a constantly changing incarnation of exactly the same spirit, how wretched she would have been! She caught hold of her pearls, which she always wore under her blouse, and remembered the ones poor old Uncle Adolph had given her, and which she had sold to a pawnbroker in order to have a fling in Paris. If she had gone back, everything would have been the same, only there would have been no pearls! She would have had to have underclothes even worse than Rachel's, and ready-made-by-the-hundred petticoats. Rachel's best patent leather shoes had an incipient crack across one toe; Cuckoo's would have had cracks. And, oh, the misery of going in buses!

Cuckoo had discovered in herself, on her return to town after her marriage, a full-grown and vigorous hatred of buses. Probably fastidious people never like this democratic mode of progress, but Cuckoo hated it with a hatred not only of mean fastidiousness, but also of the finer dislike of crowding and contact that naturally exists in people used to noble distances and clear, unpolluted air. She remembered how she had loathed the King's Road on a wet night in a crowded bus. George had laughed at her gently, and not at all unkindly, for this daintiness, but the idea had been almost an obsession with her. As she reached Meldon Edge and turned off westwards, following the narrow, deep-rutted path that had probably been first made by the Romans in the earliest days of the lead mines, she remembered one night in particular when she and George had been dining somewhere, and she sat in a bus in evening dress that was a relic of her South Audley Street days, angrily withdrawing into herself from a half-drunken man on one side, and a swaying, gin-flavored woman who was hanging on to a strap. It was one of the first occasions on which George had spoken sharply to her, for she had muttered under her breath some words expressive of her intense discomfort

and loathing of everyone in the bus, and he had answered:

"It's no worse for you, Cuckoo, than it is for everybody else. If you can catch that point of view it might help you."

She was hurt and angry, but it was in the very early days of their marriage and reconciliation had followed.

What was the little rhyme he had made the next evening as they sat over the fire happily together and the wind beat on the big north window of the studio? It was, so far as she knew, George's only venture into the Kingdom of Poesy, and she had thought the little verse not without a queer, George-like charm. She had learnt it by heart, she remembered, and now she had forgotten. Although it had been quiet in the Dale, the presage of the morning's scudding clouds was more than fulfilled up on the heights. A strong wind on which she could almost lie back, carried her along the top, flocks of cloud-shadows wandered over the hillsides as if looking for a ghostly shepherd. After a while, Cuckoo, out of breath and tired, sat down in a hollow to rest. It was a very small hollow and gave her, as she sat in it, a comfortable, tucked-in feeling. The sun came out brightly, all the shadows disappeared, and then, one by one, she saw, as she leaned over the edge of her nest, the incorporeal flocks come back.

She tried to think about her ruby, but it seemed an unsubstantial thing and slipped away from her repeatedly. She would be going to town the next day, and the ruby would be waiting for her at St. James's Square. She had always been glad that Janeways' town house was situated here in the very seats of the mighty. She thought of the huge hall and its fine old staircase; it was a magnificent house. Although Janeways had not lived in it for some three years, it would be, she knew, thanks to his habit of keeping everything he owned in most meticulous repair,

in as perfect order as if a passionately devoted mistress had never left it. Cuckoo, of course, could not be presented on her marriage, but her first Season in London was, for all that, going to be a very brilliant one.

She tried to ponder all these things as she sat in the little hollow, looking over the edge across the Dale. But the side of a hill on a fine summer's day is not a place in which such splendors and satisfactions can for long occupy the foreground of one's thoughts. And then a lark began to sing. She could see it in the sky and she lay back in the heather and listened to it. So Agnes was quite happy —Agnes and Chris, with his foolish, wonderful face. Of course they had the thousand pounds that old Vosper had left his widow, but it could not be that, she realized, that made Chris's face so shine with happiness. Of course he loved her, but love, after all, did not make men look like that. As to the baby, whose little black head she had seen in the hollow of Agnes's arm, everybody had babies and the first one always seemed remarkable to its parents. No, it could not be that. Then she fell to wondering about the poem George had written about the children in the buses; how did it go? It was five years ago, so no wonder she couldn't remember it, she thought, with an impatient frown—and then, quite suddenly, she did remember it.

> But oh! the pitiful small babes who jog
> Late in the night in buses going home.
> Their little faces graying from fatigue,
> Their eyes half shut and troubled, as they lie
> Fitfully staring at the ugly light;
> Their chilled, appealing hands, like little paws,
> Seeking so weakly, yet so yearningly
> The mother's arm, too tired to clasp them close;
> Their weary heads wobbling on weary necks
> Like pale wild-flowers the frost has kissed too soon.
> . . . Oh, God! the pitiful small babes who jog
> Late in the night in buses going home——

She said the lines aloud, slowly and softly, and suddenly she rose, a ready-made decision in her mind. She would walk on to Clavers and go to see old Mary and get news of George. It had affected her very little two or three days ago to hear from one of her aunts that George had been ill, but now she felt she must know how he was. On looking at her watch, she was surprised to find that she had sat for two hours in her warm nook; also that she had not noticed the dulling and leadening of the sky. Only a small patch of blue remained, and the countryside was almost shadowless in the absence of sun.

Lunch time had come and gone and she was hungry. So she walked along, battling against the wind, which had shifted a little and was beating her towards the edge of the high place where she walked, eating chocolate and humming under her breath. It was quite natural that being at Roseroofs should have brought George to her mind more vividly than he had been for years, she told herself, and besides, it would be a kind and friendly thing to go and see his old nurse. She paused where Roseroofs lay below embosomed in trees; in the garden there moved something like a fly which she knew must be one of the Aunts. It would please them, she thought, if she went down to Widdybank to stand for a moment by her father's grave, perhaps on her way back. A mile and a half further on she came to the old, ruined mine where she and George had had a talk on their way home from Mary Watlass's the last Christmas she had spent at Roseroofs. Cold Comfort, it was called, and cold comfort it certainly looked, gray and ugly in the sullen afternoon light.

For many, many years no work had been done there and the gray hollows and trenches were, in a measure, softened by the gradual accumulation of bracken and the hardier kind of wild plants, but nothing could do any good to, or soften, the blank ugliness of the piles and

cataracts of lustreless, useless gray stones that lay about in all directions. A sort of desolation seemed to hang over the place and to chill the heart of its beholder. At the foot of it, almost directly opposite, a mile or so away, Widdybank Church tower pointed a squat finger towards heaven. If Cuckoo went down that way she could go through the churchyard and pay the little sentimental visit that would please her aunts—and for some reason she felt that afternoon as if she would like to please somebody. There was a path through the ugly, desolate place, very rough and broken, but she could find it, she thought; and after leaving the churchyard she could go along the side of the hill without mounting again, to Clavers.

As she stood there, looking very small and girlish in her short skirt, a drop of rain fell on her face and, looking up, she saw that the clouds had lowered and darkened in a menacing way and that a sharp rain-storm was coming. A few feet below her there had been, she knew, the remains of an old miner's hut, half dug out of the hill, half roofed over with ancient and rotting boards. There was probably little of it left by now, but it would afford at least a measure of shelter, and, running down the slope, she looked for it. It was indeed ruined now, the timber lay in bits on the ground, half overgrown with weeds and creepers, and only by pressing herself close against the inner wall could Cuckoo find any protection from the rain, which now came down thickly. Luckily, the wind came from behind her, so she had, as she stood there, though uncomfortable, an odd feeling of cosiness. The shower was sure not to last long, she thought, and it was a curious and not uninteresting experience, standing there dry in the abandoned, wet place. And then quite suddenly, looking off to her right where a tangle of undergrowth marked the edge of the unbroken moorland, she saw George Loxley, as white as death, sitting on the ground leaning

against a tree, his hat off, his hands lying limply by his sides. For a moment she could not believe her eyes. George had been, in her thoughts, so plainly and naturally in Chelsea, that she stared at him as if he were a ghost. Then she noticed that not only did he not see her, but that he was in some way badly hurt, and she walked out into the rain towards him.

"George," she said, "George, what's the matter?" For a moment he did not answer, his eyes didn't open, and she repeated her question.

"What's the matter, George? You've hurt yourself."

Then his gray eyes, dark with pain, looked up at her.

"I've hurt my knee—I think it's put out—sorry, Cuckoo," and closing his eyes, he fainted away without more ado.

When he came to he looked up at her as she knelt by him, bathing his temples with a rain-soaked handkerchief, and smiled faintly.

"The same old scent," he murmured.

She laughed nervously. "Yes, Aunt Marcia gave me a bottle of it my first birthday in London; I've used it ever since. How funny that you remember."

"Oh, I remember," he answered quietly.

Then suddenly they both remembered. Cuckoo rose. "I'm afraid the pain is awful," she said formally, "and how on earth are you ever going to get down the hill?" She had forgotten that he no longer lived at the Vicarage.

"I don't want to get down the hill. I want to get to Clavers. I'm staying with Mary Watlass."

"Oh!" There was a pause, while the rain pelted down, gradually making little pools among the piles of stones that would later shine in the renewed light.

"I wonder," she said, "if I could help you? Can you stand at all?"

He struggled up and stood leaning against a tree, his

right leg crooked, his brows drawn together with almost unbearable pain.

"Suppose I run to Clavers and send someone back for you," she suggested. "Oh, George, you do look ill!"

He tried to laugh, and the attempt was rather a failure.

"Oh, it's not the pain that makes me look so bad," he said. "I've been ill with pneumonia and came up here for the air. I only arrived yesterday, and in a few days I shall be all right."

After a moment they decided to try and walk along the path, which led almost without ascending from the lead mine to Clavers. George laid his arm over Cuckoo's shoulders, and leaning on his stick, which luckily was a stout ash with a broad crook, hobbled along.

They walked in silence for a while, a silence broken only by occasional questions from her or an irrepressible groan from him.

The rain had settled down steadily, and suddenly George stopped, and with a gesture painfully familiar to her, put up his coat collar.

She burst into a nervous laugh, almost a giggle.

"It has its funny side, hasn't it?" she asked.

He nodded: "Yes, I suppose it has. Why did you laugh?"

"I don't know."

Their progress was naturally very slow, for his knee had received a severe strain, and after a while the embarrassment that, but for his disabled condition, must inevitably have distressed them on this their first meeting since he had left London for Cyprus nearly three years ago, fell on them both at the same time. Naturally Cuckoo, being a woman, tried to cover her sense of awkwardness by talking.

"Do you know," she said, her voice husky and deep, "I was thinking about you not more than an hour ago.

Do you remember the verse you wrote about the babies in one of those horrible King's Road buses?"

They had paused to rest for a moment, and George looked at her mildly, his eyes full of a vague questioning that long ago she had loved, and which, in the days she had just mentioned, the Chelsea days, had so exasperated her.

"I don't remember the verse," he said, "but I remember the babies, poor little things."

"Well, the poetry was really quite good—at least, I thought so—though Peregrine says I'm the worst judge of poetry alive."

She broke off short; Janeways' name had seemed thoroughly out of place between them.

"Have you written any more—poetry, I mean?"

As she looked at him, a deep flush darkened his thin, white face and the end of his nose stirred. Cuckoo's heart gave a little throb.

"I have written only one thing since then," he returned, in a voice which the word "grave" expresses inadequately. "Shall I tell you what it was?"

She looked at him, completely puzzled, and he began slowly:

"It is an epitaph," he said, "on a little baby:

"Spring brought her, little and serene and grave,
And like a flower. She drew one wondering breath,
Nestled once closely to her mother's side,
Then closed her eyes, and kissed the face of Death."

As he ended the lines he burst into a fit of coughing, leaning against a wall. Cuckoo drew away from him.

"You mean you wrote that for—for ours?" she asked, her words oddly divided, each one, it seemed, quite alone.

"Yes; I had the stone put up and thought I would like

just something on it. I've put 'Delia,' for my grandmother; I thought you wouldn't mind——"

There was a little pause, and then she answered:

"Oh, George, no, I don't mind. I was thinking to-day," she added, "that she would have been four——"

She laid her hand on his arm as she spoke, and, perhaps for the second or third time in his life, he saw tears in her eyes.

"I was thinking to-day how dreadful it was that I've never cared—about the baby, I mean."

Loxley drew away from her.

"Come," he said, with gentle coldness, "we must be getting on."

It seemed to Cuckoo that he was being brutal. If she wished to lay her hand on anybody's arm like that, whose arm, in the name of goodness, could she lay it on if not his? It was preposterous the way he drew aside. She flung up her head and gave a little shrug.

"I'd rather not talk about—about it all, Cuckoo, if you don't mind," he continued. "I don't mean it unkindly, but—I'd rather not."

They walked slowly on.

George said no more, but she felt that he felt that the little grave, with the poor little verse on it, was his, exclusively his, and that she was an outsider, an intruder. Yet he had told her the verse, which otherwise she would never have known.

"George," she said hurriedly, "you've never said an unkind word—*written*, I mean—to me about what I did. I don't suppose you cared much, but still it must have hurt you a little." She paused.

"Yes," he said, as he hobbled along. "I should like to tell you, not only because I'm cold and wet and tired, but I think I've often wanted to, deep down. I'm sorry about those times in Chelsea. I think it was more my

fault than yours, and I'd like to know that you forgive me, Cuckoo."

She drew a long breath. "Of course," she answered wearily, as they reached the end of the path and stood, separated from the little village only by a field, at the other side of which stood Mary Watlass's cottage.

"I think I'll sit down here, Cuckoo, if you don't mind. I can't stand much more—of the pain, I mean," he added, as she turned. "Do you mind going and telling Mary, and she'll send someone to help me to the house."

He sat down on the sodden grass, and leant exhaustedly against the wall.

"George," she said sharply, stricken with a sudden fear, "you haven't got consumption, have you?" He didn't open his eyes.

"No, I don't think I have. I've had some very bad colds—the winters are dreadful in London now."

"Then why," she asked, forgetting for the moment what she so well knew, "why don't you go to Italy or the South of France? It's ridiculous your allowing yourself to get so thin!"

At this remark he looked at her, smiling faintly, and she saw how deeply changed his face was.

"That's what the doctors all say—that I must live in a good climate and keep out of the fogs. But you may remember that my means hardly go that far."

Horrified at her own gaucheness, ashamed that she must seem to him to have acquired with dreadful quickness the rich woman's belief that everyone has money, she stammered out an apology that made matters much worse, and bolted off down the Edge. She did not come back with old Mary Watlass—who, despite the rain, herself came out bareheaded to the succor of her old nursling—but walked to the tiny inn and persuaded the host to drive her home down dale in his cart. She sat huddled over the fire,

waiting until he should be ready to start. It is a pity that Janeways could not have been an invisible witness of her progress across the hill with George, and it is an even greater pity that he was not in the stuffy little inn parlor, where his wife sat staring into the fire.

CHAPTER XXXIV

LADY JANEWAYS arrived at King's Cross at about six the following evening and was met by Giulio with a note from his master. In the car she read the note, which was merely a few words to express her husband's regret at being unable to meet her and his hope that when she reached the house his reason for so failing in courtesy would cause her to forgive him.

A little shiver of pleasure ran over her as she tore the note up and dropped the bits out of the window. It was the ruby, of course, which, in some way, was detaining him. She had always wanted a large single ruby; she could see it in her mind's eye now, as they sped through the ugly, sordid streets towards the more comfortable part of the town. It would be pear-shaped, and of the pigeon-blood color that surely, of all colors, is one of the most beautiful. She felt that its narrow end would be held by a little cap of diamonds, and that it would depend from a chain almost invisible in its tenuity. Surely such a gift was a much finer possession than the Bag of Saffron! And then her mind, tired yet unresting, like a captive squirrel, went back to its little treadmill of thought.

George's mother had died of laryngeal consumption. He had always been perilously delicate and, in his displeasure at her inconsiderate suggestion about his spending his winters in the South of France, he had—and she knew, with inadvertence—given away the fact that his doctor had urged on him this very concession. George was a man so obviously poor that no sensible doctor, she felt, could possibly have ordered him to a warm climate unless his

health was seriously enough affected to make such a step absolutely necessary.

"I'm not sorry I left him," she thought fiercely, "and it was only the way his poor nose quivered that made me feel as I did for a moment. But he needs another climate, and another climate he shall have." And at the thought of her husband's splendid liberality her heart warmed towards the old man on whose kindness she could so safely count. She would ask Sir Peregrine for five hundred pounds; she would have Rachel send this five hundred pounds to the old Scottish banker, Mr. Fleming, and through him the money could be made over to George without his ever having a suspicion from whom it really came. "If I knew he was safe in some nice, sunny place, I shouldn't worry about him," she thought, as the car drew up at the house in St. James's Square.

For a few moments, in the revival of her interest and delight in her own material welfare, under the influence of the splendid old house that was hers, Cuckoo forgot all about Loxley and his threatened lungs. She had been in the house once before, but only to decide which room she would have, and the painters had been at work on that occasion throughout the lower floor, so that she had been able to see but little of the dignified glories of her new home. But now it came on her as if a new revelation of what she had achieved were being made to her.

Sir Peregrine had not yet come in, but tea was in the white drawing-room. The white drawing-room, a vast apartment that its owner liked less than any room in the house, pleased its new mistress, and she felt, as she sat at the tea-table—a tea-table on which every article was in itself old and beautiful, as well as of value—very happy.

The minute Peregrine came in she would tell him about George. She knew he would be sorry, and she hadn't a doubt of his willingness to help her in the matter.

When she had had her tea, she rang for the housekeeper and went all over the house. Compared to it, the house in South Audley Street looked small and almost shabby, for Cuckoo did not know that poor old Uncle Adolph's taste had been a thousand times finer than the taste of the various Janeways who had devised and accomplished, in their different periods, the magnificence that so pleased her.

Her own bedroom Janeways had had done recently, and it was perfect. But Cuckoo, although she had learned much of taste from her uncle, would have preferred something a little more brilliant than the sober restraint of its pearl-gray background. Marthe, however, was in her element, and cried upon Heaven and various saints to behold the glories on all sides.

Presently the little telephone on the writing-table in Cuckoo's sitting-room rang loudly, and Janeways asked if he might come up. He came in, a moment later, looking pleased to see her as he always was, something almost of excitement in his dark eyes.

"I think," he said, as they sat down on a sofa, "that you will like what I have for you. It was by a piece of luck that I got it, and I believe, although Masterton was very discreet, that it has belonged to a Russian Grand Duchess."

Cuckoo's eyes sparkled. "Oh, do let me see!"

"First tell me how the Aunts are, and how you are yourself."

"Splendid, all of us. Now let me see."

"You must take off that blouse first. This thing must be worn against your skin——"

Pulling the blouse from under her skirt, she tore it off, and threw it on the floor, standing in the paling light with her thin but shapely shoulders bare. Janeways gazed at her for a moment, an odd look of regret in his eyes.

Then he opened a black leather case he had taken from his pocket, and, with an end of the thin chain in either hand, held the jewel up. From where she stood, it was full of the late afternoon light and glowed like a great drop of crimson liquid; it was far larger than one had expected it to be, and far more beautiful, for in all her life she had never seen such a stone.

"Do you like it?"

He fastened it round her neck and stood smiling at her.

"Oh, Peregrine," she gasped, "how perfectly glorious!"

He laughed. "Go and look in the glass, you peacock. It suits you well, you little dark thing; it suits you well!"

Cuckoo, her face flaming with excited joy, looked, even to herself, prettier than ever before, and, running to her husband, she put her arms round his neck and kissed him with real feeling. He laughed.

"I'm glad you like it, my dear, and it suits you well," he repeated. "You will, of course, wear it to-night at the Embassy."

"Wear it? Of course I shall. Even Spanish Ambassadors can't have anything like this——"

"No; I think it will probably outshine anything of Madame di Sant' Ignacio's," he answered quietly. "You must wear white with it."

"Oh, yes, I've a very good frock—white satin."

He took out his watch. "It's a quarter past seven, and we dine at half-past eight. Good-bye, my dear; it makes me very happy to have given you pleasure."

He had reached the door, when she called him back.

"Oh, Peregrine!" He turned.

"Yes, my dear?"

"I want you to do something for me—that is, not for me exactly. I met George Loxley the other day in Wiskedale, and he's very ill—I'm afraid seriously ill. He told me the doctors say he ought to go abroad somewhere."

Janeways looked at her, a little surprise in his face.

"You don't mean to say Loxley came to see you at Roseroofs?"

"No, no; it was in the lead mine, Cold Comfort Mine—and cold comfort it certainly was," she added. "He had hurt his knee and the rain was coming down in torrents, and I had to help him get back to Clavers, where he was staying with an old woman who used to be his nurse."

There was a moment's pause, and then Janeways said:

"I am sorry he's ill, poor fellow. You hadn't known he was there, had you?"

"Oh, no, it was by accident. You don't think," she went on, with a little hauteur, "that I would have seen him on purpose?"

"No, I suppose not," her husband returned in a speculative voice that seemed to her to mean more than she just then had time to decipher.

"Well, make haste, Nicoleta, we shall be late for dinner. If you want me to buy a bad picture from Loxley, I'm perfectly willing to do so, but it must be done through some third person, for, unless I'm mistaken, he wouldn't sell anything to me."

"I don't want you to buy a picture, Pelly. It's that he's so very ill, I'm really worried about him. I want you to give me five hundred pounds, or a thousand, to give to him—I can arrange it through Mr. Fleming that he will never know that it was you—to go to some good climate and live comfortably for a year. You will, won't you?"

It had grown dark in the room, and without speaking Janeways quietly stretched out his hand and switched on the light.

"You want me to give you a thousand pounds?" he repeated slowly, ignoring, because he knew her so well,

her first mention of five hundred. "Why should I do that?"

She frowned as the clock struck. "There, it's half-past seven. Oh, do say you will! I'm sure you would if you'd seen his poor face, and you're always so kind."

Still he did not answer.

"Peregrine, I'm surprised at you!" There was real indignation and disappointment in her voice, and at this his finely-cut mouth quivered a little, though the gravity of his eyes was undiminished.

"I'm sorry to have to deal a blow to your belief in me," he said quietly, "but I can't see why you should ask me to do this."

"Then you won't?" she gasped. "Do you mean to say you really and truly refuse?"

An unseen spectator would have been puzzled by the look on Janeways' face at that moment. It was a look almost of relief, and of relief heightened by expectation.

"Are you so deeply sorry, then," he asked, "for Loxley?"

"Yes, I am."

"Have you ever thought, Nicoleta," he said deliberately, evidently forgetting the flight of time, "that you made a mistake in leaving your husband? Don't think of my feelings; I'm asking you in the spirit in which your father or your grandfather might have asked you."

She stared at him. "George and I were perfectly miserable," she answered unhesitatingly; "I daresay it was chiefly my fault; if it was, it was from no fault that I could help, but it was dreadful."

Her hands strayed to the heavy jewel on her neck and her voice changed.

"I'm afraid I'm not very satisfactory to you, Peregrine," she went on gently. "I'm not much of a success as a wife and I know it, but never believe that I'm not fond

of you and grateful to you for all your kindness to me."

"Then if it were possible," he persisted, "supposing we lived in the days of miracles and it were possible for one of us, at a word from you, to undo all that has happened since—well, let us say since Loxley went to Greece—would the word be said?"

"Never!" she answered decisively.

"Ah!" he sighed, and the unseen observer, if he had heard it, might have questioned the nature of that sigh.

"Peregrine, you *will* let me have the money, won't you? You can't have any resentment against poor George, and I assure you that he looks alarmingly ill."

His eyes fell on the crimson drop as her white fingers played with it, and he stood suddenly motionless.

"That ruby," he said, "is worth a great deal more than the money you want for Loxley, and the ruby is yours."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean," he went to the door, and stood with his back to it, his heavy shoulders looking enormously broad as he bent his head forward and looked at her weightily, "I mean that the ruby is yours, and that you are free to do with it whatever you like. I am not disposed myself to do anything for your former husband, but if you choose to sell the ruby you are at liberty to do whatever you like with the money you get for it, and you will have no trouble in finding someone to buy it. Think it over."

He went quietly out and shut the door. His rooms were up another flight of stairs, and as he hurriedly dressed there was a look in his face that finally caused the faithful Giulio to ask him if anything was the matter.

"*Il signore è torbato?*"

Janeways arranged his tie with the greatest nicety.

"I don't quite know, my old Giuilo," he answered, "Whether I am troubled or not, but that I am disturbed is certain."

The old servant shook his head, and murmured the first words of a proverb to the effect that for an old man to take a young wife in the end always means strife.

"No, no, you are wrong. The Signora is never quarrelsome and talkative like most women."

Giulio shot him a quick glance from eyes as dark as his own. "Surely," he said, "the Signore——?"

Janeways burst out laughing. "No, you old rascal, of course not. With all my faults, as you ought to know, I've always respected my wives, and besides," he added sadly, "I'm too old a man. I couldn't fall in love again if I tried."

He went downstairs and waited in the library with the door open for the arrival of Cuckoo. He was very nervous and bit his lips hard as he listened for her footsteps. His very color had changed and the lines under his eyes looked dark, almost as if they were artificial. He was waiting, it would have been plain to the invisible witness that the man was waiting not only for his wife's coming downstairs, but for something far more important.

It was three minutes to eight when he heard her voice speaking to her maid on the landing, and he went out to the hall, where Walters, the butler, helped him on with his coat. Cuckoo came slowly down the broad staircase, her white frock flowing behind her, for it was before the days of the apotheosis of legs.

"I'm afraid I'm awfully late," she said as she joined him. Her cloak, with its broad chinchilla collar, was fastened close to her throat. Without a word he followed her to the car.

They were dining at the Spanish Ambassador's. Neither of them spoke until the car was drawing up in the line, a little way from the door of their destination.

Then Cuckoo said pleasantly, "I don't believe I've thanked you for the beautiful way in which you have

arranged my rooms, Peregrine. I fear I'm a very spoilt person——"

When he met her outside the room where she had left her cloak, he glanced quickly at her neck. Round it hung the ruby.

CHAPTER XXXV

MISS FLORA PLUES, dressed in deep mourning, sat by the fire in the library at Sir Peregrine Janeways' town house. A very, very old woman she looked in her black gown. There were not merely lines in her face, but the skin was like the wrinkled skin on scalded milk; it was white and soft, but wrinkled as only the skin of very old people ever is. Yet as she sat there, bending over her embroidery, the model for which, a few Parma violets, stood in a glass of water beside her, there was in her eyes, looking through huge tortoise-shell spectacles, still a look of impregnable, undying youth. Beside her, on a low chair by the fire, sat Lady Rachel Jackson. The eighteen months that had passed since the house-party at Tarring-Peverell had of course changed Rachel very little, for she was only twenty-seven, but the faults of her character were already beginning to make faint but unmistakable traces in her face. She looked more like her mother than formerly, and she was too fat, a soft, enveloping fat, and the lines in her face were all downward lines. She was well-dressed in a way but it was not in the best way, and her hair, although waved and smartly-dressed, was lustreless and rough-looking.

Alison Jackson had not done badly; his income had more than doubled since his marriage and he stood in the way of steady progress in his profession. But a little boy had come to join the twins, and life as Rachel understood it was an expensive thing. But for an occasional gift from Janeways, Rachel would have been hard put to it to keep

up appearances, and these gifts were no longer called loans.

"I wonder where Nicky is," she said, after a while. "She said she'd be in by tea-time."

Miss Flora did not answer but pursed her lips a little as she filled her needle with purple silk.

"How do you think Nicky is looking?" went on the younger woman. "Don't you find her much improved?"

"She's much prettier than I ever expected her to be," answered Miss Flora, in a voice whose tenuity matched her extremely fragile look. "She ought to be well with such an excellent husband."

"Yes, oh, yes," murmured Rachel absently. "Peregrine's a dear, of course—he's grown a good deal older, hasn't he?"

Miss Flora pushed her owl-like glasses to the end of her nose and looked over them severely.

"Not at all," she said, "I think him very young-looking."

The conversation lagged, as it always did between these two. In the old days Rachel had considered Aunt Flora delicious, and quaint, and a pet, but of late years the distance between them had seemed to widen, and Aunt Flora stood, as indeed she now stood in connection with everybody, as one on a vessel, receding from the land where the other remained.

"You're to be here all winter, aren't you, Miss Flora?"

"Yes, my dear. Cuckoo won't hear of my going back to Roseroofs and Sir Peregrine, too, has invited me to stay."

"I'm glad of that," Rachel said with sincerity, though with no particular interest. "Roseroofs would have been very lonely for you without poor Miss Effie."

Miss Effie Plues had died nearly a year ago, quite suddenly of heart failure, and for a time it had seemed that

Miss Flora would follow her. But as Janeways said to his wife, it didn't appear as if Flora could do anything so violent as to die, though there seemed to be no reason why she should go on living. However, the old lady now considered herself quite well, and was certainly far happier in her niece's house than she could have been anywhere else.

Rachel had waited for nearly an hour, and growing impatient she rose and walked about the beautiful room.

"I've got something funny to tell Nicky," she said. "I saw Bertie Fab yesterday, with his little boy on a pony. It's the ugliest little animal that ever lived, and Bertie Fab looked as proud as possible of it."

Miss Flora glanced up at her. "If he's a little boy," she asked gently, "why don't you call him 'him'?"

Cuckoo sometimes thought her Aunt Flora tried occasionally to be like Aunt Effie nowadays, and this was one of the times when the old lady spoke really more like her dead sister than like herself.

Rachel only laughed, and wandered about the room in her restless way, leaving her muff and stole on the hearth-rug where they had fallen. Both of the women were thoroughly bored when at last Cuckoo came in.

"I'm sorry to be late, and I'm glad you've had tea," she said. "You'll never guess where I've been."

"Where, Nicky?"

"I've been to see Aunt Marcia, Aunt Flora. I met Bertie this morning, and he told me that she had said she would like to see me, so I thought I might as well go."

Miss Flora flushed and dropped her sewing.

"Oh, my dear, I *am* glad. I thought poor Marcia looking very ill the other day, and, after all, six years is a long time to harbor resentment against anybody for anything."

Cuckoo stood by the fire drawing off her gloves. She nodded gently.

"Yes," she said, "it is a long time. Poor Aunt Marcia! I didn't want to go—I didn't think I could be nice to her, and somehow it seemed quite easy when I got there. I just wasn't angry any more——"

"Lady Fabricius has had a stroke, hasn't she?" asked Rachel.

Miss Flora answered. "Yes, my poor sister has been very ill for some months. I suppose," she added, turning to Cuckoo, "that Hubert's little boy is a great comfort to her?"

Rachel laughed. "Ugly little toad, how could he be!"

Cuckoo looked at her, with the touch of hauteur that so perturbed Rachel. "You forget," she said, "that little Dolph is Aunt Flora's great-nephew."

She sat down near the old lady, and smelt the violets in the glass.

"He's a very ugly little boy, Aunt Flora, but he's a dear. He's so like Uncle Adolph, it—it quite upset me."

Rachel rose. "You are a funny thing, Nicky. Sometimes you're as hard as nails, and then another time you are sentimental like this. I heard some people saying the other day how queer and inhuman you are, but I think you're much softer than you used to be."

Cuckoo did not answer, and Rachel, after giving a message that explained why she had waited, said good-bye to the old lady and then to her friend.

Cuckoo followed her to the hall and they stood talking together for a few minutes.

"Nicky, that wasn't really why I came, but I didn't want to tell Miss Flora. I've—I've just seen someone, and I think you ought to know."

"Who was it?"

Rachel watched her closely. "George—George Lox-

ley, and oh, Nicky, he looks so ill. I hardly knew him!"

Cuckoo's strange eyes were perfectly expressionless. She turned on the electric light.

"I'm afraid," she returned, "that he's very delicate.

Rachel gave a little snort. "'M, delicate! He looks as if he was dying."

"He looked as if he was dying last time I saw him, and that's a year and a half ago. Where did you see him, Ray?"

"Just outside the Stores. He didn't see me, and I'd have gone after him, only he wasn't alone."

"Who was with him?"

"Oh, nobody we know—a girl; at least, she looked a girl. They were going along in the snow with their heads bent down and their bodies sort of huddled together, the way poor people do. I—I thought I'd just tell you, Nicky."

Cuckoo's little face, which had gained something that can only be aptly expressed by the word importance, remained unchanged.

"Thanks, Ray. I'm afraid it's no business of mine, but I'm very, very sorry he's ill."

Rachel hesitated for a moment and then, as she fastened her furs and settled her hands in her muff, she said, hurriedly, "I know where he lives, Nicky, in case you should want to know. He's still in the old studio. Frank Eardley's sculptor friend lives in the same buildings and he told me. I was wondering whether the girl I saw with him is his wife or something."

Cuckoo laughed. "If anything, my dear, she's his wife, and not 'something.' I'm sorry, Ray, but I must go upstairs now. I walked home and my feet are soaked."

They kissed each other good-bye, and Lady Rachel went her way.

Cuckoo sat by the fire in her pleasant room without

ringing for her maid—a most unusual thing for the luxurious Lady Janeways, took off her shoes and put on a pair of slippers. She was frowning as she took off her hat and sables, and then began to walk up and down the room, in a way that any observer would have seen to be a habit of hers.

Presently she took off her jacket, and her little figure was visible. She was very thin, though her beautifully cut clothes and cunningly devised blouse saved her from any look of boniness. Her waist was almost absurdly small, and her head, with its beautifully cared-for hair was held in a way that made her neck look too long and too thin. Hers was not a pleasant face, it was troubled, but its trouble was of some complex kind that took from it any look of hardness. Her gloomy eyes were not sullen, but had an odd look of perplexed tragedy in them. Among modern faces, hers stood out in a way that was almost distinguished, with its lack of tenderness and facile good-nature and also its look of intense pride.

Up and down the room she marched, deep in unhappy thought. From the night, a year and a half ago, when she had decided that not even to help her former husband could she give up her ruby, she had resolutely and with remarkable success, put from her all thought of George Loxley and her life with him. Her will-power was enormous, and her instinct for self-defence had taught her that the feelings she had experienced in Cold Comfort Mine that rainy June day were feelings full of peril for her; feelings that at all costs must be suppressed. Her life was full, busy, prosperous, almost triumphant; her husband was kindness itself, and she was intensely proud of him. She was also, without realizing it, full of the pride that sets a woman beyond and above the small vulgarities that have grown like weeds in what is called the new field of women. Her life was as austere and dignified as

the most severe grandmother could have wished the life of her grand-daughter to be.

So ardent was her self-respect and her respect for her husband that some of the most rigid old women in Society had forgiven her her bad beginnings. Yes, her life, she thought, as she walked up and down, had been marvellously successful. Then, because she was quick-witted and fine-nerved, she caught the absurd pathos of the past tense she had used. She was seven-and-twenty and she had spoken of herself as if she had been fifty. She was amazed by the strength of the feeling called to the surface by Rachel's story of George; she could not bear to think of his walking in the snow-storm with his head bent and his poor shoulders drawn together. If that girl with him was his wife, she ought to be beaten for allowing him to be out in a snow-storm. She, Cuckoo, had prevented that, even in her worst Chelsea days.

If only she could know how he really was! "If only I dared write to him," she said under her breath. Presently she went into her sitting-room and switched on the light. No, she couldn't write to him, for he had never answered the letter she had sent to Mary Watlass, after their meeting in the rain-storm, to ask how his knee was. She had been very angry at his disregarding her letter, and her anger had helped her to overcome the dangerous feeling of weakness that had come over her at the sight of his face and the sound of his voice.

She went to the window and looked out. It was still snowing hard, and she could imagine him and his companion—his idiotic fool of a companion, to let him get his poor feet wet—huddled in a bus, jostled and trodden upon by unwashed, bad-smelling people. She could see him getting out into the mud and hurrying up horrible, sordid Barker Street, down which the wind from the river always whistled as through some canyon. And then

they'd climb up those long, resonant, cold stairs, and he would open the door with his latch-key, and they would go in and the fire in the studio would be out and he would not be able to find the matches. She gave a little nervous laugh. George never was able to find the matches in the dark—and when he did, the wood would be damp, and Mrs. Peacock would have forgotten the milk for tea. Suddenly she drew a long breath and turned away from the window. How absurd she was! It was in *her* day that the fire went out and the matches were lost, and the milk was forgotten. Probably the girl whom Rachel had seen was a good manager, and the room was cosy, and the curtains drawn and the hearth swept. How bored she, Cuckoo, had been by George's hatred of an untidy hearth! As she reached the fire, the door of her room opened and Janeways came in.

She went straight to him, and putting both hands on his arm, leant her little head on her hands. He seemed not at all surprised by this silent demonstration, and put his arm round her gently.

"My dear Nicoleta—poor little Cuckoo," he said tenderly. "What's the matter?"

She shook her head without answering and he went on: "Nothing? Just the same old Camelius hump?"

Then, with a sigh, she looked at him. "Yes, Pelly. I'm so glad you've come in. I don't know why I should be miserable, but I am."

They sat down on the sofa by the fire, Janeways holding her hand and looking at her with an immense and pitiful tenderness in his eyes. Anyone seeing them thus together would never have dreamt that he was her husband. If not her grandfather, he must be, one would have thought, an adoring, indulgent father.

He said little or nothing, and she did not seem to expect words from him. In the vast and vague malaise

that was always just on the point of enveloping her—an undefined, dull sense of loss and misery—she had come to regard him as the only person in the world who understood and could help her. And this although they had never discussed the matter and rarely spoke of any but the most superficial things.

"Where have you been this afternoon, my dear?" he said at length.

Her face lighted up as if she were about to give him something.

"Oh, yes, I went to see poor Aunt Marcia. I'm glad I went; she's very piteous, her poor face all drawn down. I think you know that she misses Uncle Adolph dreadfully." He nodded.

"Very likely. He adored her, and no one likes to miss adoration."

Cuckoo then told him about the funny little boy, Bertie Fab's son.

"It's a pity he didn't take after his mother," Sir Peregrine said. "From that glimpse I had of her the famous night of the Follies Bergères, I thought her very pretty. What was her name—Grant?"

"Yes. But Adolph is a dear little fellow, although he's so ugly," Cuckoo explained. "And he has the sweetest little manners."

Janeways looked at her with the fine gravity that was his.

"I am sorry, my dear," he said, "that we haven't a son. I have often noticed that a little boy takes away all feeling of loneliness from a woman who is alone."

She caught his hand and laid her face for a minute against it.

"But I have you, Peregrine," she said. "I don't want a little boy."

"You haven't yet learnt," he returned gently, "what the things are that you *really* want."

Cuckoo rose, her momentary softness gone.

"I know well," she answered, "and what I wanted I have got. I need no pity from anybody, except for my silly Cameliusness. And now I must go and dress for dinner, dear Magnificent."

He rose obediently. "You've got what you *wanted*, no doubt," he returned smiling; "what I said was, that you don't know, and you have not yet learned, what you *want!*"

"No, no," she said, shaking her head, "you are not to say again that you are too old for me, or that my youth is wasted. I won't have it, for it isn't true. When I was born something was left out of me; I suppose it's the thing they call sentiment; and from what I can see of people who have it, I'm only to be envied for the lack."

She smiled, a brilliant, conventional smile which she had learned early in their married life, but which, since then, she had brought to a high state of perfection, and they parted.

When she was alone, she went to her dressing-room and stood for a moment to settle her thoughts before speaking to her maid.

She would put, and keep, George Loxley out of her mind. She would have loved to tell her husband about George, but she had never forgotten the one time he had failed her; the time when she had asked him to help. No, she could not tell Peregrine.

They had guests to dinner that night, and Cuckoo, who had developed through the reading her husband, almost without her knowing, had taught her to do and through meeting the clever and brilliant people who compose what is probably the best society in the world, was, in her way, an almost exceptionally good talker. She

had learnt French, too, studying hard, applying herself in a way that surprised and delighted her husband, and the guest of the evening, a distinguished French painter, showed his admiration for her in the delightfully courteous manner of his race. After dinner she went, as was her wont, upstairs for a moment to see Aunt Flora, who preferred to dine alone when there were guests. Miss Flora gave a little cry at the sight of her, and waved her hands in the way that had caused such a distressing mixture of feeling in Aunt Effie.

"My dear," she cried, "how pretty you look!"

Cuckoo burst out laughing, a laugh Aunt Flora had just begun to notice because of a new frankness and spontaneity it held.

"I'm a lovely woman," she returned, kissing the old lady, "and it's a delightful thing to be appreciated at home."

Miss Flora stretched out her hand, that trembled a little, and touched the great jewel that hung on her niece's neck. "I do love your ruby," she said; "it's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, Cuckoo."

Cuckoo caught it in her hand and held it tight for a moment, the light dying out of her face, her mouth hardening.

"Yes," she said shortly, "it's very beautiful."

She did not stay long in the quiet upstairs room, and when she had gone back to her guests, old Miss Flora sat gazing into the fire.

Presently, quite unconsciously, the old lady spoke aloud.

"I think," she said, "that Peregrine is right."

CHAPTER XXXVI

NEXT morning, Lady Janeways, very plainly dressed and wearing over her dark coat and skirt an old country Burberry, left her house so quietly that not even the servants knew she had gone. It was a dull, damp morning, yesterday's snow transmuted into black, sticky puddles and mud; and fog, the dirty, depressing fog which, gray and filmy, has none of the charm, even for confirmed Londonophiles, that has a real, impenetrable yellow one.

Cuckoo walked quickly to St. James's Street and got a taxi.

"I don't know the address I want to go to," she said to the man; "it's in Chelsea, close to the Embankment, and one end of the street comes out not very far from the Underground Station. I'll knock on the glass when we get there."

She drove along, leaning back in the corner, thinking hard. She had slept little, for an insistent, annoying thought of George had not left her all night. She had no wish to see him personally, but she felt after Rachel's story that she could not bear not knowing how he really was. She had never dared to think much about what she had done in connection with the ruby, but the very fact of her fearing to reflect about the matter proved that, at least subconsciously, she knew how base her act, or rather her lack of action, had been. And now, as the taxi made its way to Sloane Square, she was fighting a furious onslaught of memories. She knew that she might, if she had sold the ruby, have provided for George for the

rest of his life, without his ever suspecting the source of his independence.

Paul Fleming, the invalid son of the old banker in Glasgow, had lived in London in the early days of her married life with Janeways, and she had chanced to meet and know him. He had been fond of George, but he had taken a great liking to Cuckoo, a liking so great that she knew, in spite of her fierce withdrawal from any sentimental contact with anyone, that she could use his feeling for her to a great extent just as she liked. The money could have passed through Fleming's hands as the posthumous gift from his old father, who had died just before Cuckoo and her husband went to Tarring-Peverell. It would all have been so easy, so simple, if only she could have made up her mind to part with her splendid bauble. But this she had been unable to do, and George had gone on being poor and ill.

Since her husband left her sitting-room after giving her the jewel, Cuckoo had never referred to the matter. She had worn the ruby and she had not failed to notice the look in his eyes when, after her taking off her cloak at her hostess's house, he had seen it on her neck. He had said nothing then or afterwards, and she had often wondered what he thought. It seemed to her that morning on her way to Chelsea that she was pretty sure what Janeways must think. She had always resented his refusal to help George, and she had buttressed herself against her own conscience by trying to believe Janeways mean in the matter. But she knew that he was not mean; she knew that he was generosity itself. She had come to know indirectly the kind and thoughtful things the old man did every day of his life, and she knew that one of the things that was always said of him was how well he deserved his great wealth, because with it he made the lives of so many people at least more bearable, if not

really happy; and the thought, with time, had become more insistent to Cuckoo that there must be some really good reason for the strange attitude he had taken about George.

She had never allowed herself to go to the bottom of the thing and look at the truth that she knew must be there. She loved her ruby; it was hers, and Janeways had been cruel to give it to her and then try to make her part with it. But now she was obliged to own to herself definitely, without reserve, that Janeways was not cruel. He had refused to help George, and she could no longer refuse to recognize that his reason must have been that he wished in some way to test her. Well, he had tested her, and she had failed. She drew a deep breath and bit her lip. It hurt her, in a way that surprised her, that she had failed in Janeways' eyes, and she laughed angrily. "It's ridiculous to feel the way I do. The idea of his being disappointed in me! After all, the ruby was mine, and when one considers the things he has done in his life—the trouble he has made——" She broke off. It was no good. She was ashamed, because she knew that Janeways was ashamed of her.

At last they came to a corner where she paid the chauffeur and dismissed him. From the sordid street in which she stood ran a smaller, still poorer little street, composed of very small, very ancient cottages that must have stood there when Chelsea was a riverside village; and each little cottage still had in front of it a narrow strip of garden, separated from its neighbor by tumble-down palings. It was no thoroughfare and at the far end of it was a high wall, on the other side of which she could see, amid naked trees, a squat church-tower. Yes, this was the place. She walked slowly up the street, attracting in her shabby coat very little attention. It was raining now, and at every door-step was clustered a swarm

of children, who otherwise, she thought, would have been roaring and screaming in the streets. There was among the children the usual proportion of unwiped noses; and they were dirty and unattractive-looking. Cuckoo shuddered as she looked at them. She had forgotten the number of the house she wanted, but as she walked along she stopped, and looking at one of the windows on her right, stopped and gave a little laugh. In the window, behind stiffly starched Manchester lace curtains, stood on a little table a turquoise-colored jardinière with an artificial rubber-plant in it.

"I always knew she had taken that thing," she said aloud. Then she went into the little garden and knocked at the door. As she stood there waiting for the answer to her knock, which was long in coming, a curious feeling of other days came over her. She was not Lady Janeways, of St. James's Square and Tarring-Peverell, Yorkshire; she was not even Cuckoo Blundell, of 65B, South Audley Street; she was Mrs. George Loxley, of Whistler Mansions. It seemed to her that she had but just left the untidy, miserable studio and that in a moment she would be going back there, up the cold, damp stairs and into the room she so hated. She thought with a shudder of the badly hacked, cold leg of mutton that would be in the larder; and of the gas-stove that, although the man assured her it didn't leak, always smelt and made her head ache.

When the door opened she started, so deep had she been in her bad dream. The slatternly woman with the wisp of red hair and the teeth that moved up and down when she talked, looked at her dully, without recognition.

"Are you Mrs. Peacock?" Cuckoo asked. "Yes, of course you are. I'm Lady—that is, I used to be Mrs. Loxley, of Whistler Mansions. Do you remember me?"

Mrs. Peacock did, and expressed her interest and

pleasure at seeing her ladyship. Cuckoo, on her invitation, followed her into the little, stuffy parlor. Mrs. Peacock had, with the passage of years, evidently forgotten the blue jardinière which, as she herself would have said, she had "pinched" from the place where it had been put after the unlamented death of the palm it had originally contained. She had also forgotten the lace-edged tea-cloth that had become hers in the same way.

Mrs. Peacock had not changed for the better, and her servility (she had in the old days been anything but a polite woman) annoyed Cuckoo. So very quickly she got to the matter in hand.

"Do you still work for Mr. Loxley?" she asked.

"No, not now, m'm—my lady. You see, I married again shortly after your ladyship went away; and what with two babies comin' and my 'usband 'avin' good work, I didn't go out for a while. But a friend o' mine, Mrs. Briggs—she lives in the 'ouse opposite, I gaive 'er the job and she still goes reg'lar. Pore gentleman," she added, in an unpleasantly sentimental way, "she says as 'e coughs somethink awful."

"That is just what I've come to see you about," Cuckoo said, in a voice afterwards characterized by Mrs. Peacock as "that proud." "I'm in a great hurry, so I'll tell you quickly what I wish you to do."

The little woman rubbed her hands. She smelt of soap, so it was obviously washing-day in Rosetree Grove.

"Anythink I could do, my lady, I'm sure——"

Cuckoo frowned. "Please don't interrupt me. My husband and I are very anxious to find out exactly how Mr. Loxley is. We've been very distressed to hear of his ill-health. I will give you five pounds if you will find means to go to the flat and see Mr. Loxley yourself, and, if you can, without letting him know that you've seen me, find out just how he is, what his plans are—in short, I

wish to know all that you can find out, and particularly if he is painting, and where, if he is, he sells his pictures. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Peacock did understand, and Cuckoo was obliged to cut short her ecstatic appreciation of her ladyship's kindness towards the poor gentleman.

"Thanks," she said, "that will do. Now, if you should ever tell anyone that Sir Peregrine Janeways and I have taken means to inform ourselves about Mr. Loxley," she added, rising, "I will have you arrested for stealing that flower-pot and this lace cloth."

Mrs. Peacock was offended; Mrs. Peacock was indignant; but Mrs. Peacock was frightened and filled with cupidity as well. So at the end of five minutes the matter was arranged and Cuckoo stood at the door, listening unwillingly to the woman's repeated promises to do everything her ladyship required.

"Mind you don't lose the address," Cuckoo said, "and when you ask to see me, be very, very careful to say nothing to any of my servants that could get you—not me, Mrs. Peacock, but *you*—into trouble."

Just as she was leaving, she turned.

"By the way," she said carelessly, "I forgot to ask you whether Mr. Loxley has married again. I saw him the other day with a lady, and I hoped——"

Mrs. Peacock interrupted, a sly smile in her unpleasant little face.

"No, m'm—my lady, he isn't married, though I know a lidy as would give her eyes if 'e was, and to 'er, too."

"Indeed?" Bitterly ashamed of herself, Cuckoo stood as if nailed to the path, waiting.

"She's a Miss Carson—lives in the same buildin's she does. She paints fans. Quite a noise lidy—always pleasant. Mr. Loxley 'e often goes to see 'er, Mrs. Briggs says, and she goes to see 'im, too. Wore 'erself quite

out, takin' care of 'im, she did, when 'e was ill last time."

Lady Janeways stood, her little figure remarkably straight, her little face white and haughty.

"Oh, I *am* glad of that! It's dreadful to be alone when one is ill," she said. "Good morning, Mrs. Peacock. I shall expect you one evening at the end of the week." Mrs. Peacock stood at the door and watched her visitor making her way up the street. She was thoroughly frightened, for the blue jardinière and the tea-cloth were not the only things that had, under her guidance, changed their abode in the old days. She was busy that morning, but in the afternoon she would go and have a cup of tea with Maud Briggs and arrange to take that lady's place at Mr. Loxley's flat the following day. Mrs. Peacock would have liked to be very angry with Lady Janeways, but she didn't dare, so she decided to put all thought of the stolen things out of her mind and comfort herself with planning what she was to do with the five pounds her ladyship had promised her.

Meantime Cuckoo had gone out into the broad thoroughfare and was making her way back towards Sloane Square. The rain had ceased, and as she was perturbed and nervous, she decided to walk part of the way home. She went quickly on, deep in thought, hating herself for the humiliation of her scene with Mrs. Peacock, trying to plan what she could do for George if Mrs. Peacock's report on him should be very bad. She could sell her jewels at any moment, she knew Peregrine would not mind; she was even beginning to have a shrewd idea that he would, on the contrary, be glad if she did so. But she had no wish to part from the beautiful things she loved with an intensity of which few women could have any idea. One of her greatest pleasures was to lock her door and spread out on a big table all those wonderful gifts

of her husband's and look at and play with them. She loved her silky, big pearls with something like passion, and she had many of them. Diamonds she did not so greatly care for, so Janeways had given her only a few, but they were very fine ones and she was fond of them because of their intrinsic value. Her emeralds were very good, and the ruby she had never seen beaten, although there are in London some of the finest rubies in the world. Of course, she reflected, if George were really seriously ill she could, and would, sell some of the things, but when it came to deciding which she would part with, each single object seemed absolutely indispensable to her. Presently she came out on the Embankment. The river was full and oily-looking, rolling smoothly along, the color of *café au lait*. For a while she stood leaning on the parapet, staring absently across towards Battersea Park. She remembered the day she had rushed out of the house, deciding that she could no longer go on and that she must have a change. It had been raining then, and it was not raining now, but the time of the year was the same and there was the same slippery, slimy, brown mud in the road, and if it had rained she knew the dull scene would have the look of the day she had never forgotten, for it was the day she had seen Janeways sitting in his car.

Suddenly she saw a man and woman walking slowly towards her. The man was slight and bent and leaning on the woman as if he had been ill.

At first she thought it was George; but it wasn't, and for some reason as she passed them she felt a great relief. The young woman, who was extremely pretty, said, as she passed, "Does the air make you feel better, darling?" Cuckoo frowned. That was not George and his Miss Carson, but it might have been. She laughed as she realized she did not like Miss Carson, who painted fans. "I'm an idiot," she said to herself. "Poor George! I

ought to be glad someone is taking care of him—yes, and I am, really."

Halfway down the Embankment she hailed a taxi and drove to Curzon Street, whence she went home on foot.

She was very busy the rest of the day, for two days later she was to give her first ball, before which there was to be a dinner-party that she was bent on making a great success. One or two minor Royalties would be there, and, what she knew from her husband was of more real importance, two old, frumpish and extremely dull ladies of the old school, who had never before honored her with their presence in her house.

Aunt Flora was deeply interested in all the arrangements for these festivities, and Cuckoo had invented various little ways in which the old lady might suppose herself to be helping. She was growing very fond of her old aunt, and she knew besides that it pleased Janeways to have her pay these little attentions to Miss Flora.

When she went upstairs that morning she found Miss Flora very busy and very important, giving orders to a grand young gentleman from the florist's about the decoration of one of the rooms.

"Cuckoo, dear, don't you think tulips would be lovely in the gray drawing-room? All yellow and white tulips?"

Cuckoo kissed her aunt. "Beautiful, of course, but horribly expensive, you wicked woman!"

Miss Flora drew herself up.

"Peregrine will not mind that," she said with pride.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ON the afternoon of the ball, Janeways came up into Miss Flora's room, looking troubled.

"Have you seen Nicoleta?" he said.

The old lady, who was rearranging some beautiful old lace on the black silk gown Cuckoo had given her for the party at which she insisted she should appear, shook her head.

"No. She went out about three. She told me where she was going, but I've forgotten; my memory, Peregrine, is not what it used to be."

"You have," he said, "the most beautiful memory, Flora, because you remember only kind things."

Miss Flora smiled at him, the happy, new smile that had come to her, despite her sister's death, in the last few months. She was useful now, and useful to the man with whom, for many years in her youth, she had been deeply and quietly in love.

"You always say kind things to me, Peregrine. I'm a very happy old woman."

Contrary to his usual courteous way, he was not, she saw, giving her his undivided attention. He sat down, and for a moment leaned his white head on his hands.

"Something is wrong," he said, "and I don't know what it is. Flora, let's talk."

Miss Flora laid aside her work and drew a little closer to the fire.

"Yes," she said, "we'll talk. You begin, Peregrine."

He looked up, and she saw that his forehead was drawn into a most unusual tangle of perplexed lines.

"It's about Nicoleta," he said. "I don't know what it is." Miss Flora nodded.

"Yes, there has been something for several days. I've noticed it, too. She thought that we should think it was excitement about the ball, but," she added with a little laugh, "we didn't, did we?"

Janeways shook his head.

"No. Do you remember our talk the day I sent young Taylor away from Tarring-Peverell, Flora?"

"Do I remember! Why, Peregrine, it was the happiest day of my life; how could I forget it? It is just like my luck, you know, to have had the happiest day at the end instead of the beginning of my life; it makes old age so pleasant a thing. Well, what about that day?"

"I told you then," he returned, "that I feared I had wronged Nicoleta. I have been since then growing surer of it every day and yet I have had the feeling, or rather the hope, that though I rob her with one hand, I might be allowed to give to her with the other. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I know. You've been trying to educate her; to develop her; you've been trying—well, to wake her up."

Janeways rose and walked restlessly about the room.

"You're right. I have tried very hard, and because she's grateful for the things I've given her—material things—and for what she considers my kindness to her, she has been very bribable in doing what I asked her. She has read many books that at first bored her to death, and now I find that it is easier for her to read fine ones; and good books help everybody. I think she's beginning to see that although she's rich and has whatever she wants, she yet has not everything that she needs, or that she ought to want. In any other woman I should have feared the coming of the other man, but Cuckoo is per-

fectly to be trusted in that way. I don't think," he added slowly, "that she would ever deceive me."

Miss Flora turned and looked eagerly at him, where he stood by the window. "She has never been deceitful although she has always been reticent."

"Did she ever tell you, Flora, what she once asked me *à propos* of George Loxley?"

"No."

"She once wanted me to give her a large sum of money for him. What do you think I did?"

Miss Flora was thoughtful for a moment. "I'm sure," she said, with a queer little note of pride in her voice, "that whatever you did, it was the right thing."

"I hope it was, and I believe it was. I refused to give him a penny."

There was a long silence, for Miss Flora, in spite of her resolution to believe in his wisdom, was, he saw, a little staggered at this.

"Do you see why I refused?" he asked.

"No, Peregrine."

"Well, it was because I wanted to see if she would do something for him herself; if she was sorry enough for his condition of health to sacrifice to it, not an unimportant sum of my money, but something that was dear to her personally. It was the day I gave her the ruby, and as a matter of fact, Flora, I told her that she was at liberty to sell the ruby and give every penny of the money she got for it to Loxley, if she wanted to."

Miss Flora's hands fluttered for a moment in the old way, then she clasped them in her lap.

"And she kept the ruby?"

"She kept the ruby."

"You were sorry, Peregrine?"

"I was very sorry—and what is more," he added thoughtfully, "she knows—knew all along—that I was

sorry, and she's a little ashamed of it. Well, just after lunch to-day I went to see Lady Pelter about some business I am seeing to for her, and Rachel was there. Rachel tells me that young Loxley is in seriously bad health; she saw him, it appears. On top of this she told me that she had told Nicoleta. I come in and find Nicoleta almost in a state of hysteria. I have never before seen her in such a mental condition. I asked if anything was the matter, and she told me," he laughed sadly, "that she was nervous about the ball. Imagine her being nervous about the ball! And now she's gone out."

Miss Flora rose; she was very much agitated.

"Surely, Peregrine," she exclaimed, "you don't think she's gone—to George?"

Janeways looked at her almost sternly. "No, of course she hasn't. It would," he added, as if that settled the matter, "be an improper thing to do—for her to go and see him who was once her husband. But I don't know—I feel that we've come to some kind of a crisis."

"Yes," said Miss Flora, "she has changed of late."

He sat down again by her, and taking her old hand, kissed it.

"No, Flora, I don't think she's changed," he said. "I think she's grown."

He meant so much by this that Miss Flora was silent for a while, and, before the silence was broken, Cuckoo came in. She had returned quite to her usual manner—the manner that had newly become usual to her. She rang for tea and poured it out for them and herself, talking quietly about the ball and looking with real interest at Aunt Flora's new gown.

Janeways watched her in almost unbroken silence, and at last he said: "Where have you been, my dear?"

She looked at him, her clear eyes suddenly veiled secret places.

"In Chelsea," she said, "walking, and then I went to Bond Street, and then I stopped to see Aunt Marcia for a moment. Where have you been?"

At the mention of Chelsea, Janeways and Miss Flora looked at each other, and Miss Flora suddenly rose to a height of valor that surprised herself.

"Have you heard," she asked, her voice trembling a little, "anything about George of late, Cuckoo?"

Cuckoo looked at her with the fine gravity she had learnt since her marriage—a gravity that had always distinguished Janeways even in his wildest days and which she seemed to have caught from him.

"Yes, Aunt Flora, poor George is very ill I fear. I saw him coming out of a shop in the King's Road."

"Oh, poor boy! You—of course—you didn't speak to him?"

Cuckoo shook her head and poured out tea.

"Oh, no, I could hardly do that. I don't think he would have liked it; besides, he was not alone. He was with," she added quietly, "a girl, a very pretty girl with red hair."

Miss Flora, unjustly and ridiculously, felt a little shocked by this piece of news, but Janeways it was who answered.

"I'm afraid the poor fellow will never be strong," he said, "as long as he lives in this vile climate."

Cuckoo said nothing and, after a moment, left the room. She went to her own room and, looking at the clock, saw that she had two hours in which to collect her thoughts. So, putting on her dressing-gown, she lay down on a sofa by the fire and switched off the lights. Into the whirl of emotion she had lived in for the last three hours and which she had shut away in her mind so long as she was in Miss Flora's room, came now the other pang, that she had thus far kept at bay—jealousy. She

told herself that it was absurd; that no one on earth had as little right as she to be jealous of George Loxley or anything he did. But her telling herself this did no good. She could see them now as they came out of the shop, George leaning on the arm of his companion, much as the young man on the Embankment had done that day —the young man whom she had at first taken for George. And the girl was so pretty—so pretty, with such a fine, radiant air of youth and health, in spite of her obvious poverty; she looked like a Spring day that had strayed by chance into the wilds of November; she looked like an apple-tree blossoming in the sun.

In the firelit darkness Cuckoo buried her face in her hands in shame at what she had done, for she had followed them up the crowded King's Road and seen them disappear round the corner of Barker Street. That was bad enough, but she had done worse; after walking for an hour trying to quell the tumult that had arisen in her, she had gone to Whistler Mansions and, after studying the address-board in the hall, she had called on Miss Carson.

The girl was at home and alone, sitting by the window at a little table painting. Under the pretext of having heard of her fans somewhere, Lady Janeways went in, bought a fan, and sat by the fire to dry her wet feet, she said. Miss Carson, of course not suspecting who she was, and grateful for the unexpected sale, talked without reserve of her work, and, in an innocent way, of her own life. Cuckoo learned that her father was dead and that her mother lived in Bristol, which she couldn't leave because her two little sons were at school there. Miss Carson herself had been living in the Mansions for the past year and liked it very much.

"Don't you long to go back to Bristol?" Cuckoo had asked, and a bright flush had spread over the girl's face.

No, she didn't want to go back to Bristol; she liked London; she was very comfortable in the Buildings. Cuckoo, sick with shame yet driven by wild curiosity to go on, then asked her if she had many friends in London.

"No; I only know one or two people. I've some cousins in Cricklewood, but I don't see much of them. I have one friend living here, of whom I see a good deal——"

Cuckoo looked the other way. "Is she a painter too?"

Nina Carson shook her head and blushed again.

"Yes, but it isn't a 'she;' it's a 'he.' Oh, yes, he paints beautifully. He's taught me a good deal. I'm expecting him down any minute, he's promised to put in the figures on the little Trianol fan—that parchment one on your left."

Cuckoo rose. "You're very lucky to have someone to help you," she said kindly; but something in her voice made the girl stare. "Do tell me your name, won't you," she said, "and who told you about me? He—George—would be so interested."

"My name is Bunbury," Cuckoo returned, in involuntary tribute to Oscar Wilde's delightful play. "I can't remember who told me about you; however, it doesn't matter, as I've got the fan."

A few minutes later she had found herself in the street, and now, in her beautiful room, surrounded by all her "things," she was in such a turmoil of misery and jealousy as she had never in her life experienced.

She was too confused, too upset, to be able to analyze her feelings or even to set them in order and look at them squarely. Everything seemed in a whirl round her. She didn't want poverty; she certainly wasn't in love with George again—she was quite sure about that—she didn't know what she wanted; she didn't know even what she did not want. If it had been about anything else in the world, she would have gone to Janeways and told him.

But that she could not do. Presently she rose, and took from its hiding-place her great leather jewel-case, and, locking the doors of her bedroom, she turned on the lights and spread all the jewels out on the lace counterpane; and there they lay and sparkled at her. She took them in her hands, let the light play on them; she pressed the pearls to her cheek; she covered her little fingers with rings and waved her hands to herself in the glass. Here, here were her "things"; the things she had always wanted, the things she had achieved.

When Marthe came in to dress her, she found her mistress sitting quietly by the fire, reading.

Miss Flora came in just before dinner, an ethereal, unsubstantial, but delightfully pretty Miss Flora; and pinned to the lace in the front of her gown was a beautiful diamond brooch.

"Cuckoo, look, look, my dear, what Peregrine has given me!" the old lady cried, skipping just a little, old as she was, in her joy.

Cuckoo kissed her. "I am glad, dear Aunt Flora. That was kind of him, wasn't it?"

Miss Flora left her and went down to the library where she knew Janeways would be. When she thanked him for the gift, which had been sent her in a bunch of violets, he took her hands and swung them out to her full length and then back again, in a boyish kind of way.

"Flora," he said, "here we stand, you and I, an old man and an old woman——"

"I'm years older than you, Peregrine," she broke in.

"—Waiting for something to happen. The feeling is strong on me. If anything should happen to-night after the ball has begun, may I come straight to you?"

"Peregrine Janeways," the old woman said steadily, "if my death would do you or Cuckoo the least little bit

of good in the world, I would gladly die for you to-night."

He was moved by her earnestness, but he laughed softly. "I don't want you to die for me, but I may want you to get up at an ungodly hour and let me talk to you, for I know something is going to happen. We've come to the end of a chapter; we've come to the end of a period; we are going to have to begin over, old as we are, my dear."

Miss Flora looked at him and saw that he was very grave under his smile.

"Then we'll begin over, the best way we can," she answered. "Be sure you come if you need me. And now," she added, emboldened and less titubating than usual, for now that he really needed her her old timidity had gone, "I've a favor to ask you."

"It's granted."

"No, no, wait till you hear what it is, Peregrine. To-night is a very important night for Cuckoo. Oh, I don't mean something we don't know about, the way you mean, but I mean this dinner and the ball. It's going to be very splendid and she's going to be very proud, and I want you —oh, Pelly, *please* let her wear the Bag of Saffron."

After a pause, Janeways answered, very quietly:

"I'm sorry, Flora, but I can't. If I'd a son, or possibly even a daughter, he or she would understand; it's in our blood. But I couldn't make you understand, and I sha'n't try."

"But people know about it, Peregrine. Blanche Pelter was talking about it only a few days ago, and it appears people have asked her why your wife doesn't wear it."

Janeways frowned. "It doesn't follow that because I have a wife she must wear the thing; neither of my two former wives wore it, as you know. Besides, it's a hideous thing. The diamonds, though very good, are not so fine as others I have given Nicoleta."

"For all that," Miss Flora persisted, "I wish you would let her, even if it is only this once."

Janeways put one of his hands on each of her shoulders and looked closely into her beautiful old eyes.

"I am almost inclined," he said gently, "to offer to let you wear it, my very dear Flora, but I can't let Nicoleta. Please don't ask me again."

Miss Flora went sorrowfully away. She had forgotten all about the brooch on her own bodice.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MISS FLORA lived several years after that night, but she never forgot one single incident of it. She had lived so long quietly in the country that she was apt to become confused when she found herself with many people; her memories even of the house-parties at Tarring-Peverell had been blurred, and overlapped a little; she could not quite remember which of two episodes had been before the other, and so on. But the great ball —the ball that had been given after many months of wary and skilful waiting by Janeways—was destined to remain in her mind so long as she lived, perfectly clear and sharp.

Cuckoo, looking better than she had ever looked in her life, all in white, with her best jewels, seemed to Miss Flora, as she received her guests, to have an odd air of conferring on them the honor and pardon they were in reality supposed to be bestowing on her. Even the Duchess—that greatest of Duchesses, Her Grace of Trafalgar—seemed to lose in majesty as she shook hands with the little nobody whom that old fool, Pelly Janeways, had run away with. The Duchess had hated the idea of Cuckoo and opposed with all her might the reception into the fold of the dingy little mutton. Miss Flora, who was standing on the landing above, peering down, too excited to move, knew this, and observed with joy the gracious, unflattered air of the little gray mutton in question.

"She looks better than any of them, Pelly," the old lady whispered to Janeways a little later, when the danc-

ing had begun and she had chanced to meet him as she went into the library.

He laughed. "She does—she's exceeding magnifical, Flora. God bless her," he added gently.

Miss Flora saw that he looked pale and that his extreme pallor, against the snowy whiteness of his hair, seemed to have taken on a yellowish tinge.

"Are you not well?" she asked hastily.

"Yes, my dear, I am quite well."

They stood together for a moment unobserved in the softly lighted library, and Miss Flora could hardly have been prouder of him, possibly not so proud, if she had been his wife. He was so very handsome, so very distinguished-looking, she thought.

"Do you still feel," she asked him, "that something is going to happen?"

He nodded gravely. "Yes. To-night, you see, is an *étape*—a kind of station, a milestone on the Dover Road, Flora. We've all of us come to an end, as I told you before dinner, and in order to make a new beginning, something must happen. However, my dear and beautiful friend, will you do me the honor of walking through the ballroom with me? I wish to introduce you to one or two people."

Miss Flora took his arm, and they went through the white drawing-room into the ballroom. The orchestra was playing a waltz, and Miss Flora, on listening to it with a keenness of delight that had, on her first hearing music in London, surprised herself, recognized with amazement a melody that seemed to be threaded through the dance music.

"What is that thing they are playing?" she asked, her violet eyes full of light.

"I don't know; it's a waltz."

"Yes, but—it's something I know." And then, as they

walked across the great room close to the wall, Miss Flora Plues blushed as violently, as beautifully as if she had been eighteen. She had recognized the melody and it was the "Wedding March," Mendelssohn's "Wedding March," adapted to waltz time by the caprice and cunning of some transatlantic composer. And here was she—Flora Angela Plues—marching to it down the huge room, crowded with fine people, with her hand on Peregrine Janeways' arm! To that tune!

Janeways did not notice, but Miss Flora kept time, with an exactitude that somewhat impeded her progress, to the subdominant melody, and several times when they stopped and Janeways introduced her as his dear and old friend and his wife's aunt, Miss Plues, of Wiskedale, Miss Flora's little old feet, instead of keeping still under her lavish silken skirts, continued in spite of herself to beat time to the music. It was a wonderful moment to the old lady.

Cuckoo was waltzing, and passed her husband and her aunt as they reached the far end of the room, and, pausing, she looked back over her shoulder and blew them a little kiss and smiled.

"I wonder," Janeways said thoughtfully, "what it is that is going to happen? Something somewhere is on its way to us—the Lame Messenger is coming."

And while the music played and the freshness of the thousands of flowers gradually dwindled to the faintly unpleasant scent flowers have in great crowds; while minor Royalty looked on with the resigned amiability of its kind, and London Society finally gave its definite consent to the return to the fold of the naughty Lady Janeways, the messenger, limping indeed, was coming to St. James's Square. A lame messenger in a groggy bonnet and a dirty, crumpled black jacket; a messenger lame, not through having flayed her feet for love, but because

the high-heeled old boots she wore cramped and squeezed her neglected toes. Mrs. Peacock, having left her bus at Piccadilly Circus, was hobbling down Lower Regent Street through a fall of dirty snow. The shifty-eyed old woman hurried along through the wet, muttering to herself under her red and discouraged looking nose. She wanted a drink, but there was not time, and besides, despite the general inferiority of her nature, she was really alarmed and horrified by the news she was bringing. When she rang at the area bell of Janeways' house, she was made to understand at once that her visit was not only unwelcome, but, on that night of high revelry, absolutely unacceptable to the powers of the kitchen.

"I tell ye," she said, "I 'ave to see 'er laidyship. I've got noos for 'er—important noos."

"A likely story that!" sneered one of the servants, with the ugly, vulgar heartlessness of the well-fed, comfortably-housed dependent towards one of the lowest of his kind.

Mrs. Peacock whimpered and pleaded, but in vain. At last, spurred by the memory of the scene she had just left, she lost her temper and burst out into a few words that gave pause to her tormentors.

"If ye don't let me in," she wound up, "it'll cost you yer jawb, I can tell ye. She told me to come, 'er laidyship did. I've got a message for 'er, and you'd better let me in."

Something in her voice brought conviction to one of the maid-servants, and seeing that the woman was really cold and wet and that under her unpleasant aggressiveness there was something like real fright, she called her in and gave her a chair.

"I'll go and get hold of one of the footmen," she said, "if you'll tell me your name?"

"Peacock's my name—Mrs. Peacock. She'll remember

—'er laidyship will. You tell 'er I've come from Chelsea——"

It must have been nearly half an hour afterwards that the maid-servant came down again.

"You're to go up," she said; "wipe your boots good. Come along."

Mrs. Peacock followed her up the stairs, at the head of which she was handed over to a young footman, who surveyed her with intentionally visible disfavor. The poor woman on her upward career caught short glimpses of beautiful, brilliantly-lighted rooms, and heard snatches of music, only to be compared with the music of the Guards' Band in the Park on a Sunday afternoon. Finally the young man stopped and opened a door.

"You're to go in here and wait," he said. But Mrs. Peacock had not to wait long. The room that she was in was a small sewing-room at the top of the house, and through the open door the music still reached her; she stood listening, until Lady Janeways came in.

"What is it?" she said sharply.

"Oh, your laidyship! Your laidyship promised me five pounds if I'd give ye any noos of the pore gentleman, so I thought——" Mrs. Peacock broke off, rubbing her uninviting-looking hands together and glancing upward in a cringing way that made Cuckoo want to beat her.

"What is the news?"

"Well—me and Mrs. Briggs was sittin' over the fire in 'er 'ouse an hour ago—or maybe hour and a' 'alf—when the porter from Whistler Mansions come over to fetch 'er. We was just 'avin a cup o' tea——"

"What's your news?" Cuckoo repeated, stamping her foot.

Mrs. Peacock felt aggrieved, and showed it. Like other people, when she had a good story to tell, she liked to tell it in her own way.

"Mr. White," she retorted with dignity, "said, 'would Mrs. Briggs come hover to the gentleman in Number fifty-nine?' So we went hover, and oh, ma'am—my lady, I mean—the pore gentleman, the pore gentleman!" and Mrs. Peacock, who did not need alcohol as much as she thought she did, began to cry—tears whose source was not unconnected with the "Lamb and Compasses" at the corner of Barker Street and Weaver Street, S.W.

Lady Janeways, whose face had lost every vestige of color, laid her hand on the woman's dirty jacket.

"Tell me," she said very quietly, "tell me at once! Is Mr. Loxley ill?"

"Ill!" Mrs. Peacock gave a little shiver and drew her wrist across her face. "If blood all over the floor is bein' ill, then 'e is. In a dead faint we found 'im, and——"

Lady Janeways, who had evidently not forgotten her bargain, handed her a five-pound note.

"Thank you," she said, "you may go now; and hold your tongue downstairs."

As the woman started to the door, Lady Janeways called her back.

"Wait a minute. Was Mr. Loxley absolutely alone?"

"Habsolutely, except for Miss Carson, wot paints fans —she was there. They'd been 'avin' supper."

"Take this woman downstairs, Judson." The young footman, who had been hovering in the passage, led Mrs. Peacock away.

Five minutes later, Janeways, crossing the lower hall with one of his guests, saw at the top of the stairs a little figure wrapped in a long black cloak. Excusing himself, he went towards her; supper had begun, and that part of the house was nearly deserted; Janeways had only a moment to himself, having just seen the guest-in-chief to

her car and intending to devote himself to the next hungry lady of rank. He walked towards his wife and met her at the foot of the stairs. Cuckoo looked at him.

"I want a taxi," she said.

"Where are you going?"

She was very white, and he noticed that her lips looked dry as if she had had fever and stuck to her teeth as she spoke.

"George is dying," she said slowly.

There was no one in the library, and without answering, Janeways drew her into the room and closed the door.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

She stared at him, and he could see the whites of her eyes above the irises, but she did not answer.

He laid his hands on her shoulders. "You mustn't go out now. You must remember your guests. To-morrow I will go with you and we'll do for him all that can be done."

The invisible spectator of whom mention has been made before, had he been there, would have noticed on the old man's face an odd, watchful, almost artful look.

"I will help you," he went on.

"She said—blood—on the floor. His mother died of consumption," Cuckoo answered, not heeding what he had said.

Then Peregrine Janeways did something very odd. "Do you wish," he asked slowly, his eyes bent on hers, "do you wish him to get well?"

As again she did not answer, he went on. "Then I will help you. Shall I sell for you some of your jewels?"

"Some of my jewels——?"

"Yes. If you let me sell your ruby it would probably save his life——"

As he spoke the orchestra in the distant ballroom began to play some kind of an interlude. It was a medley of American negro songs, which, at that time, were popular. Cuckoo stared over her husband's head, her eyes dilated, her mouth half open.

"'Nellie was a lady: last night she died,'" she said softly, under her breath.

Janeways watched her, in his eyes an agony of hope and distress mingled in a way that would greatly have puzzled that hypothetical spectator, and then suddenly she raised her hands, tearing from her neck the great ruby that hung there, and wrenching at the diamonds at her breast. Some of the things she dropped without heeding, the others she held out and pressed into his hands.

"Take them," she said, "take them, the horrible dreadful things. I hate them. I hate—everything. I—I'm going."

"Where are you going, Nicoleta?"

Almost as if she had been asleep, she passed her hand over her eyes, and then, her face clearing, she answered him.

"Forgive me, Peregrine," she said gently. "I shouldn't have spoken like that. But George is dying, and I'm going to him. You see, he is really my husband—not you." And without a word more she left him and went out into the night.

He followed her, called a taxi and put her into it.

"Tell him Whistler Mansions, Barker Street, King's Road," she said, without looking at him. And the taxi turned round and carried her off.

Janeways went back into the house, had a stiff brandy and soda, and the next half-hour was very busy doing his duties as host. He explained to his guests that his wife was ill and that he had insisted on her going to her

room; "I think she'll be quite all right," he added, "in an hour's time."

When everyone was busy with supper, and he had made sure that Cuckoo's absence would cause no discussion, he went up and found Miss Flora. The old lady had put on her dressing-gown, and was sitting by the fire drinking a glass of milk.

"I have just come to tell you, Flora," he said, "that everything is all right, and that I am very happy."

Miss Flora looked up. "Has anything happened?"

He nodded. "Yes, I think so. I think the best thing of all has happened, and I thought I'd come and tell you. I'll explain to-morrow."

Bending over, he tilted her little old face back with his hand and kissed her.

"Good-night, my dear," he said, "I shall have much to tell you to-morrow."

Half an hour later a girl who was sitting on the stairs, wrapped in her cloak, at Whistler Mansions, was startled and frightened by footsteps coming towards her. She rose hastily, wiping her eyes, and faced the newcomer.

"I wish to see Mr. Loxley."

"He's—I'm afraid he can't see anybody," she said. "He's been very ill. The doctor has just gone."

Janeways looked at her in a way that would have been stern but for the wonderful glow in his big eyes.

"You must let me in," he said. "I'm Sir Peregrine Janeways, and a very old friend of the family."

Miss Carson, who painted fans, shrugged her shoulders.

"There's a lady there," she said. "I don't think they want anybody."

There was a little pause, and then Janeways went on:

"When the lady came were you in the room?"

"Yes."

"I wonder if you would trust me enough to tell me what happened?"

The poor little girl, whose promise of happiness had an hour ago been knocked sky-high, looked at him and she did trust him.

"Oh, she just came in"—she answered wearily. "He had just come out of his faint. I'd got the doctor, and —well, it was just as if they belonged to each other—so I'm going home."

Janeways helped her to her feet, and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"They do belong to each other, my dear," he said gently. "He'll tell you all about it, no doubt, in good time. In the meantime will you promise me to tell nobody one word about it?"

This was a little too much for Miss Carson, who did not see what he had to do with it and who said so.

Janeways smiled. "But I have a great deal to do with it," he retorted. "You see, I'm her husband."

When the door had closed behind him, after the silent use of poor Miss Carson's key Janeways took off his hat and felt in his pocket for something. Then very quietly he walked to the end of the passage.

A generous fire was burning on the hearth, but only one electric light was lit, so that the big, dusty room had lost its simplicity of shape and seemed to be full of mystery. In an arm-chair by the fire, his ruffled fair hair standing out against the light behind him, lay George Loxley, his head against a pillow no whiter than his face; his eyes were shut, and at first Janeways thought he was asleep. At his feet, half-kneeling, half-crouching, was Cuckoo, her cheek leaned against one of the sick man's hands, her eyes filled with the firelight. For the first time, she looked, to Peregrine, like a wife.

Presently Loxley spoke.

"Are you there?" His voice had an exhausted sound, and he hardly moved his lips.

Bending forward, listening acutely, Janeways waited for the answer. Never, even to Miss Flora, did he tell what it was that Cuckoo answered, but it was enough. Purposely he moved a little, so that the two by the fire looked up and saw him. Neither of them spoke, but they drew closer together, and Cuckoo's left hand went up and joined George's right. Janeways advanced slowly out of the darkness, his two hands held before him in an odd way, almost as a man holds a skein of wool that some woman is winding, and from his hands there seemed to drop great splashes of fiery light. Without a word he came to the fireplace, his eyes fixed on his wife's. She did not rise, and he could see her press closer to Loxley, but as he reached her she spoke.

"Hush," she said; "he mustn't be agitated——"

Still Janeways did not speak, but bending over her, he passed his hands above her head, and opened them. She looked down. The Bag of Saffron hung round her neck. She took the little, inadequate bauble in her hand, and looked up at him.

"Why?"

He smiled, and there was in his smile an extraordinary nobility and sweetness.

"Because, my dear, you have earned it to-night." And then he sat down and explained to them.

"At last you've found," he said, "what it is that you have always wanted, and I, who have always feared that through my act you had lost the power to know, am glad. When you told me, Nicoleta, there in the library, that you were going to your husband, you told me only what I had known for a very long time and what I have been waiting for you to learn."

Loxley had not spoken, but, at these words, he stretched out his hand to the old man. Janeways took it.

"I think," he said, with a little laugh that eased the strain they were all under, "that not many men have been as relieved as I was under the circumstances. Nothing for many years has made me so happy as your suddenly finding that I, and all I stood for, were not worth while."

She made a little gesture of protest, but he went on. "I mean in the right way. To have you see, even now so late in the day, that jewels and riches, after all, count very little, made me more happy than I can tell you. To have you leave me to-night of all nights—and, mark you, I knew that something was going to happen and that it would happen in a dramatic way—has given me a degree of thankfulness and real contentment that I cannot explain. You love each other," he broke off sharply to say.

Cuckoo answered. "Yes, I think I always have loved George, only I was such a fool I didn't know it."

"But you've known more or less since your adventure in the old lead mine?"

She stared at him. "How did you know, Peregrine?"

He rose. "My dear, I have the privilege of knowing a great deal about women, and that was quite plain. But now," he added, rising and taking from a chair her cloak which she had thrown there, "we must be going."

Cuckoo drew back. "I'm not going. I shall never leave him again."

Janeways smiled. "Don't be a goose, my dear. No woman can possibly survive two scandals! George, tell her she must go with me. I have telephoned for a nurse for you. She ought to be here by now, and the kind little girl I met on the stairs will, I am sure, do anything she can to help you. But Nicoleta must come back home

with me. Don't say you can't, my dear," he added sternly, "for you can and you must."

Loxley raised his head a little. "Quite right," he cried, hoarsely. "Do what he says, Nicky. But—you'll let her come back," he went on, adding, with an odd little reversion to his boyish way of speech, "won't you—sir?"

Cuckoo had risen, and her husband threw the cloak round her.

"She will come back in time, Loxley," the old man said. "You mustn't be impatient, either of you. You may have to wait for some time, for no one can force events. Thus far we are all right, so surely we can leave the future to itself——"

"I can't leave him, Peregrine," she whispered.

Janeways took up the little gold bag that hung from the splendid chain round her neck.

"I haven't given this," he said, "for the first time in my life to a woman to have that woman prove not to deserve it. You must trust me, both of you."

And there was in his manner, in his voice, something so fine, so generous, that they did trust him.

George, he said, was to go to the South as soon as he was able to travel, and before then he and Cuckoo should meet many times.

"After that," he added, "you will, as I have said, just have to wait. It can't be for so very long."

Loxley held out his hand. "I can't tell you," he gasped out, in little broken sentences, "how splendid I think you, or how grateful I am. It's—wonderful, and I don't even want it—it—you know what I mean—to be soon. It's hard to explain, sir, but I should be happy like this for a very long time."

Janeways shook hands with him.

"I'll come and see you to-morrow, and we mustn't any of us vulgarize things by sentimentality. The chief point

is that Cuckoo has—well—you know what I mean."

Cuckoo knelt by Loxley and kissed him good-bye.

"That Cuckoo has deserved the Bag of Saffron, you mean," she added; and a few moments later Sir Peregrine and Lady Janeways were in a taxi going home.

No one was much surprised when Lady Janeways, at the very end of the ball, appeared again. The story of her sudden indisposition had been accepted without reserve, and when she said good-night to her guests, every one of them noticed that instead of the splendid ruby and the diamonds she had worn earlier in the evening, she wore now but one jewel. Lady Pelter was delighted.

"Oh, my dear," she said, "I am so glad! It's really very quaint!"

When the last guest had gone Cuckoo knocked at her aunt's door.

Miss Flora was in bed, her pretty hair screwed up in tight wads on her forehead. She wore a pink flannel jacket, and on her little nose sat the owl-like spectacles. She was reading.

"Well, my dear," she said, as her niece came in, "and have they all gone at last?"

"Yes, dear Aunt Flora, they have all gone at last, and I—I just thought I'd come and say good-night to you."

Bending over the old woman, the young one kissed her, and suddenly Miss Flora gave a little shriek in her most piercing voice.

"Cuckoo Blundell!" she cried. "What is it?—it *can't* be——?"

Cuckoo smiled at her, and the old woman was struck by the new expression in her niece's clear little eyes.

"It is," she said.